A Moving Sea between the Shores

by BladesAndSwords

Summary

Separated ever since their adventure through the looking glass, Tarrant and Alice try to find happiness in their own worlds. But a new breach between realities may transcend time, space and the distance between them.
Alice looked through the spyglass.

She loved starry nights.

Not only they helped her find her way in the sea, but stargazing also proved to be a comforting pastime after a hard day of sailing towards Peking.

The days were filled with crazed winds and the relentless sunbeams, but nights were usually peaceful.

"I found it." She smiled and drew a line in the sky with her finger. The main deck was silent. The only sound came from the waves crashing against the hull and the keel. "Tien Hwang Ta ti."

"My chinese still needs practice."

"It's Polaris, James."

"Right." He repeated the constellation's name in both languages as he wrote it down. "It took us more time than I expected. I was starting to think it was impossible."

"James, you know how I feel about that-"

"Word, yes I know." James made one last annotation in the chart and looked at her. He was grinning. "But the face you make when you hear it is priceless."

Alice put the spyglass away from her eye. Her face was stern, and her voice free of all amiability.

"That's no way to talk to your Captain, Harcourt."

James' smile banished in a heartbeat. He lowered his head and vowed.

"Forgive me, ma'am." He looked like a nervous cabin boy in his first travel.

It was Alice's turn to laugh.

"You always fall for it." She tapped James in the shoulder with the spyglass. "That truly is priceless."

James pretended to be offended and folded his arms.

"This sort of treatment is what causes mutiny." His voice was overly dramatic. "It's not a threat, just a courteous reminder."

"I'd better write it down in my log, then. Your advices are always sensible and timely, James." Alice said, walking towards the entrance of her cabin.

"Are they?" James asked with genuine disbelief. If there had been a sun instead of a moon in the sky, Alice would have seen how his cheeks flushed.

"Of course. You aren't my first mate for nothing." Alice said as she opened her cabin's door.

Her mother was sitting next to the table. She was reading a book, waiting for dinner to be served. Her face softened at the sight of her child.
"Goodnight, Alice." She then looked at the shy figure standing behind her daughter. It didn't matter he was half covered in darkness, Helen knew who he was. "James. I assume tonight's lesson went well."

James laughed nervously and coughed.

"I…" he sighed and gave a little shrug.

"I had to help him find Polaris. He spent half an hour looking for it." Alice explained.

"The motionless star? The most basic constellation for sailors?" Helen frowned.

"Yes."

"Oh."

James rubbed his forehead and wished the sea would swallow him that instant.

"Good thing he is a fast learner. And he draws charts like an artist." Added Alice. She glanced over her shoulder and gave James a reassuring look.

James answered only with a nod.

Three sailors emerged from the ships' kitchen. They saluted Alice, Helen and James, placed the trays with the dinner on the table and went back to where they came from.

"Finally. Come Alice, you need eat healthy if you wish to keep your strength." Exclaimed Helen as she put the book aside.

"You could at least call me 'captain' so you don't make me feel like a child, mother." Alice rolled her eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous, Alice. Care to join us, James?"

Helen's invitation came as a surprise to both the captain and the first mate. They looked at each other, neither sure of what to say.

"Well, I did promise the crew I would have dinner and sing a couple of shanties with them at the mess deck tonight." Said James with great respect.

"Actually, that sounds like great fun." Said Alice with determination. "Don't mind if I join you."

"You are the captain; do as you please." Said James.

"Your wisdom is showing once again, first mate."

"It's my honor, ma'am."

Helen interrupted their conversation and insisted once more. This time, James knew better than to contradict the captain's mother and entered the cabin.

He sat down in front of Helen, who was already offering him generous slice of salted pork.

Alice felt the sudden desire to join them. A dinner of three would not be as entertaining as a night of games and songs with the rest of the crew, but to Alice, it wasn't less appealing either.
"Make sure to take us safely to Peking, Tom." Alice exclaimed to her second mate at the helm.

"Of course, captain!"

Putting her trust in the hands of the loyal sailor, she finally joined her mother and James.

They talked of trivial things and told occasional jokes while enjoying the somewhat insipid but generous food. Helen couldn't tell if it was Alice or James who spoke the most.

When it was time for dessert, James proposed to have some tea instead of the planned bread with cheese. Alice and Helen agreed to the idea, though Helen found nighttime a weird time for tea.

The three finished dinner with a hot cup of Congou black tea.

Its toasty flavor brought old memories back to Alice. She allowed herself to get lost in them.

She probably would have wandered amidst her visions forever if it hadn't been for James.

"Are you alright, Alice?" He asked, trying to hide his concern behind an overly courtly facade.

"What?" Alice felt as if she had crashed back into reality after a long fall. She was spilling tea on her vest and pants. Fortunately, the tea was lukewarm by then. "Oh… I'm sorry; I guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"Understandable." Said James, feeling twinge of shame for his inconsideration. He finished the rest of his tea in one gulp and stood up. "Thank you for the invitation, Miss Kingsleigh. Good night."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay a little longer?"

"I appreciate the thought, but it's getting late and I must supervise the cargo inspection tomorrow." James showed his respect with a little vow of his head. He then looked at Alice and gestured as if he was doffing his hat. "Ma'am."

Alice nodded in response.

He left the cabin and closed the door without making much noise.

Helen stared at the entrance for while. She sighed and told her daughter James was right: it was best to call it a day and go to bed.

To her surprise, Alice needn't much convincing.

After the three same sailors from before had taken away the dirty dishes, the two women put on their gowns, blew the candles out and laid down on their separate mattress.

Alice didn't say a word the whole time.

"Goodnight, my child."

Still no answer.

Helen didn't insist and closed her eyes.

She soon fell asleep.

Alice was still awake. Her eyes were fixed on the stars.
Some of their light pierced through the cabin's window and reached her bed.

In an attempt to fall asleep, she began to name the few constellations she could see.

There were times, like that night, when sleeping was more of a chore than an enjoyable necessity. It was not because her dreams were plagued by nightmares.

They were full of absence.

His absence.

_In the palace of dreams we shall meet._

'But we don't, Tarrant.' Her thoughts were not free of bitterness. 'We don't.'

Sleep came to her after she looked at Polaris one last time.

She had a dream.

But it was no different than the other dreams she'd had ever since the end of her adventure through the looking glass months ago.

It was empty.
"Tarrant."

It was her.

There was no doubt about it.

At last, after countless attempts, he had found her.

They were together.

"Wake up!"

Something pricked his nose. He was kicked out of the palace of dreams and thrown back to the green fields of Underland.

"Ow!"

He stood up in one single maneuver.

His hat fell from his head.

"Show yourself, Nose Stinger, foulest of creatures. I do not fear you." He said, ready to fight if necessary.

"It's me, Tarrant."

He squinted and saw Mallymkum hanging from his nose. He laughed and scooped her with his hands.

"Mally, I'm sure you can find better ways to wake me up. You can have a Jub Jub bird drop an egg on my face, for example." He suggested with a wide smile. After a second thought, he frowned. "Definitely not one of my brightest ideas."

"Tarrant, we have no time for this." Replied Mally, resting her hands on her waist.

"Of course we don't, he is in his castle right now." Said Tarrant.

"Your father's been looking for you. He was worried, and so was I. And all this time, you were sleeping." She folded her arms and began tapping her foot.

"I was only taking my daily five-minute nap." He shrugged.

Mally raised an eyebrow.

"Tarrant, you've been gone for a week."

He blinked.

His heart skipped a beat.

If Mally hadn't been one of his most trusted friends, he wouldn't have believed her.

It seemed liked it had been just a second ago when he lay down on the soft grass, next to the tiger.
lilies and the roses.

He didn't even remember closing his eyes.

Time was really funny in dreams.

"What's the matter? " Mally's features softened. She sat down and caressed his thumb. "You've been sleeping an awful lot lately. If there's something wrong, you can tell me. We'll find a way to sort it out!"

Moved by Mally's words, Tarrant smiled and scratched her head.

Perhaps there was no harm in telling her about it.

The sound of distant trumpets and drums interrupted them.

"It's time." Exclaimed Tally, getting back on her feet.

"Where? I don't see him." Tarrant covered his eyes and searched. "His entrances are becoming more dramatic."

"What? No!" Mally pointed towards the distant Witzend. "The celebration, Tarrant. It's about to start."

He had almost forgotten all about it. His eyes went from green to a faint golden.

Truth was, he had little interest in attending.

But his entire family would be there, and he didn't dare to leave them alone. If something happened, Tarrant had to be there to protect them.

"Then let us speak no more, Mally. Time is short and he waits for no man, or mouse." He picked up his hat and put Mally on his shoulder.

"But he sure loves to leave both frozen in time. In himself." Mally muttered with resentment.

"That was long ago, he wouldn't do that again. Not after all the times he's had tea with us, Thackery and my family." Said Tarrant, fully convinced he was right. "We have a lot of fun with him, don't we?"

"No." Mally pouted.

"Oh my." Surprised at the revelation, Tarrant shook his head. "And here I thought everyone was getting along..."

"But it doesn't matter if I like him or not, or if he is short or not." Tally insisted. "It took me almost half a day to get here. We won't be able to get there on time."

"Of course we will."

"How?"

"With my newest crafting!"

Tarrant spun his hat on his finger.
"I present you the Gyre-Hat! It gyres in your hand and will take you along wherever you throw it. Unless until you let go of it, of course. Let me show you. You better hold on tight."

Mally didn't fully understand, but she grabbed Tarrant's jacket and braced herself for whatever craziness he had under his sleeve.

Meanwhile, Tarrant took his hat by the border, and aimed towards Witzend.

The throw had to be swift and graceful.

"Here we go!" He threw with all his strength without letting it go.

The hat spun between his fingers like a wheel. He held on to it as if his life depended on it.

And in a way, it did.

He and Mally left the ground and began to fly across the air at a speed only possible for a flying hat. The wind opened their mouths and filled their eyes with tears.

Mally's screams soon transformed into laughter, and she began to cheer in excitement. Tarrant joined her and started to wave goodbye at the people below them with his free hand.

They pointed at them as if they were a shooting star.

"Tarrant, look! I'm going to touch the sun." Mally raised one of her fingers towards the sky.

"That sounds like it could burn a little." Said Tarrant. "Nothing some cold butter can't heal."

They were so immersed in their games they didn't notice a group of borogoves.

"Hey!" squealed one of the creatures.

Tarrant thought it wouldn't be polite to ignore the greeting.

"Hey there!" he answered.

The borogove crashed against his face. It took Tarrant several attempts before he could shook it off.

"Sorry!" he screamed to the bird, who was left flying around in confusion among his disconcerted peers. Tarrant coughed pink feathers and put one inside his pocket. "I'd better save it for my next hat."

"Tarrant, this is genious!" Screamed Mally. "But how will we land?"

"With a crash, most likely."

"What?!

"There's no better way to end a travel!" Explained Tarrant with sudden seriousness. "And my throw wasn't exactly graceful. Actually, it was the opposite."

The city of Witzend became visible just as they were losing altitude.

They weren't losing speed.

It was going to hurt, Mally knew that much.
"This is madness." She screamed to Tarrant.

"I know!"

They looked at each other and exploded into a crazy cackling, enjoying every second of their flight before their eminent crash became a reality.

Zanik looked at the tower clock for the third time

Where was his son?

Tarrant had spent all of his time with him and the rest of his family in the last months, filling the days with stories of what had happened in Underland during the Hightopp's imprisonment in the Ant Farm.

When the anecdotes became too gloomy, Tarrant's mood decayed, so Zanik thought it convenient to balance the tales of Underland's dark era with frequent tea parties at Thackery's.

He had never been fond of such meetings.

He lacked a sweet tooth, and found the rowdy nature of those reunions annoying; however, the rest of his family seemed to enjoy them, even his wife, who was his most similar in terms of personality.

Above all, tea time had a soothing effect on Tarrant, and allowed him to bond with his family. Zanik couldn't complain. Granting his family those moments was the least he could do after being separated for so long.

He even put up with the occasional presence of Time.

If Tarrant had forgiven Time for freezing him, Mally and Thackery in tea time for who knows how long, then Zanik could turn an blind eye to it too.

But the more Time stayed away from his family, the better.

"Would you stop staring at that thing? Your eyes won't make it go slower." His wife held his face gently and forced him to look away from the clock. She caressed his cheek and fixed his bowtie.

"I know that very well, but I can't help but to worry, Tyva." Said Zanik. "Tarrant's been gone for too long. What if…?"

"You know he likes to wander off on his own every once in a while."

"But what if something happened to him? Maybe a Jub Jub bird attacked him." Zanik glared at the tower clock. "Or maybe He froze him again."

"Zanik…"

Pimlick and Bumalig came out from the shop. They were clad in their finest clothes, and wore newly crafted pink hats.

"We are ready, mother." Said Bumalig, standing next to her brother. "Shall we go?"

"As soon as Tarrant arrives, my dear."
Pimlick's eyes became wide with fear.

"You mean he isn't here yet? He's going get us in trouble like last time!" he hissed to his sister.

"Hush, Pim."

Pimlick scoffed at his sister's petition and rested his back against the wall.

"Shukm!"

"Watch your language, Pimlick Hightopp!"

"I'm sorry, mother."

Tyva sighed.

"All we can do now is wait." She assured to her family. "And hope Tarrant gets here on time."

"And without him." Added Zanik under his breath.

"Then we are going to need the wonderest of wonders for that to happen!" Said Pimlick, pulling his hair in despair.

Bumalig heard something in the distance, and saw a shooting star in the sky.

"If you are so hopeless, you might as well make a wish upon it, Pim." She said to his brother teasingly, but also trying to cheer him up.

"That makes no sense, but I have nothing to lose." Pimlick joined his hands, fell to his knees and closed his eyes. "Oh, noisy shooting star, please make my crazy brother come back home. Now. This instant. Timely. I ran out of synonyms, help!"

Zanik picked his son up.

"Put yourself together, Pim! There's no way that's going to work!"

Just as he ended his sentence, something fell down the sky and crashed right where they stood. Zanik and Pim became surrounded in a cloud of dust.

Tyva and Bumalig shrieked at the scene and ran towards their fallen men.

When the dust faded away, they saw the missing Tarrant laying on top of his brother and father.

The three Hightopps came back to their senses at the same moment.

"Hello, my family." Said Tarrant as Bumalig helped him stand up. She put a pink hat on his head.

"Son!" Zanik tried to reach him, but his back would hurt him for a couple of days. Or weeks.

His wife put him back on his feet with extreme care.

"It worked." Pimlick said in awe. He got up on his own and embraced Tarrant until his bones creaked. "It worked. Callooh! Callay!"

"This family affection is too much for me." Said Mally, jumping down from Tarrant's shoulder. "I'll see you all there."
Tarrant couldn't answer.

He could hardly breathe.

"Dearest brother, you're going to make my spine go snicker-snack." He said with the last remnants of air in his lungs.

Pimlick gasped and let go of him.

"The only thing that will go snicker-snack will be our heads if we are late." Pimlick said with anxiety. "Let's get going at once! Bim and Paloo are already waiting for us there. Hurry, hurry!" He led the way, running faster than ever before in his life.

Even Mc Twisp would have envied his speed, Tarrant thought.

"Pim is right, mother." Bumalig held Tyva's hand. "Tarrant, you help Father."

He grabbed Zanik's arm.

Together, they started to walk.

His father scoffed.

"I'm not a tired old man." Muttered Zanik with indignation, lifting his chin with a lofty air.

"But you've always been a little slow." Said Tyva. She and Bumalig were a few steps ahead."Have you forgotten the time you challenged the Turtle to a race and lost?"

"Father, I didn't know that!" Exclaimed Tarrant. "It must have been unforgettable."

"To my everlasting shame, it was." Said Zanik, at first with bitterness, but quickly a small smile appeared on his lips. "I did some crazy things too when I was young, Tarrant."

"You must tell me all about them! I also have to show my new Gyre-Hat. Guaranteed to become the Hightopp's trademark hat in a second or less!"

"Perhaps, son. We'll see about that once the celebration is over."

Zanik saw how his son eyes became golden.

Tarrant grabbed the pink hat on his head and clenched his fist. His father could feel how his son trembled.

"The queens are trying to make things right, Tarrant." Said Zanick, his voice free of his usual sternness. "As their people, we must support them."

"To one of them I will always be loyal. "Said Tarrant . "But to the other…"

"I know, that's why I ask you that you try to be as forgiving with her as you were with Time."

"But Time didn't release the Jabberwocky upon us, or beheaded half of Underland, and he didn't keep you all away from me for so long." For an instant, Tarrant's face became deformed by anger.

He turned his head around, hidding it from his father.

Zanik noticed, but he decided it was better to pretend that he hadn't. After all, he had no real
arguments to lessen his son's resentment.

The wounds were still too fresh to heal. Only time could tell how everything would turn out.

As they approached the castle, the multitude grew bigger, and Witzend became pinker.

The color plagued the city.

There was not a rose or a single house that hadn’t succumbed to it.

Zanik stopped for a moment before they reached the entrance.

"Are you ready, son?"

Tarrant didn't answer at first. He had kept his face hidden since his outburst.

When Zanik was about to put a hand on his son's shoulder, Tarrant looked at him.

His green eyes were beaming, and no one could have guessed that not long ago, they had been tainted with wrath.

"Ready and readier, father!" Tarrant began to run, and dragged Zanik along. They made their way through the multitude, with Tarrant pushing every person, frog, monkey or fish out of his way, while his father apologized to them afterwards.

Tarrant kept running even after they entered the castle. He had the hope that, if he ran fast enough, he would end up somewhere else.

Perhaps in another castle… or in another a palace.

One where he could continue searching for her.

For Alice.

It was all he truly wanted.
Meetings

Morning transformed into afternoon in the blink of an eye.

Time meant nothing to Alice when she was closing deals with people like the Ambassador of Peking. It was no less demanding than escaping from pirates or surviving in a storm.

Now that their reunion was over, she had to leave Peking and go back to Tianjin port, where her mother, ship and crew waited for her.

And she was bringing bad news.

Anger still had her body and mind numbed.

She got off at the station of the port after two hours of travel. Outside, it was as hot as Peking. Her sweat and the salt from the sea breeze stuck her clothes to her skin.

The train's whistle echoed across the station. The machine filled the air with smoke as it rode the rails towards its next destination.

Alice watched it go until disappeared into the distance.

She swiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand and went on her way. Her steps were quick and heavy, as if she wanted to pulverize the ground with her boots.

The words of the Ambassador resonated in her head like a loud bell. Her heart pounded hard inside her chest.

They made her blood boil.

"Miss Kingsleigh." A young servant called her at the station's entrance. He wore the Ambassador's logo on his uniform. "Your transport is ready. Let me take you to your lodgings."

Alice didn't look at him. She ignored him as if she didn't understand his language.

"Miss Kingsleigh!" the boy ran after her.

"It's Captain!" She exclaimed without stopping.

Luckily for Alice, the streets near the station were always overflowing with people and merchants. She blended with a mob gathered together by their curiosity for a man with the newest type of camera, brought directly from the West.

She pushed her way through. The deeper she went, the less she heard the servant's screams.

Once she reached the other side, the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Alice guessed he would remain trapped for a few minutes in that sea of people, and felt sorry for him. It hadn't been him who had upset her, after all; he was just doing his job.

She felt some guilt, but she was too angry to go back and look for him.

All that she wanted was to go to the port and check on her ship… and spend some time there alone.
It took her half an hour, or perhaps more, to get there on foot. It was as busy as in the morning, when she had left James and Tom in charge of the supervision.

Sailors from other crews were still unloading their cargos, while the newly arriving ships weighed the anchors and slid the sails back down the mast.

The other captains watched her as she passed by. Some with intrigue, others with indignation.

Alice had grown accustomed to both reactions in her career at the sea, and had learned to keep her head high even with those eyes trying to bring her down.

But now it was not a good time.

Her confidence wavered, but she managed to keep it until she got to the Kingsleigh & Kingsleigh ship.

She boarded it and went to the upper left corner of the deck.

She rested her hands on the board and looked down at the sea.

The waves distorted her reflection like a broken mirror.

"Alice?" the voice came from behind.

She turned around.

It was James. He was sitting next to a barrel in the opposite corner of the deck. His sleeves were folded up to his elbows. The hat on his head covered his eyes almost completely.

"Good to see you. It was a hell of a morning." James said after a long yawn. He stretched and stood up. "There's nothing like a quick nap to recover from-.

"Why are you still here?" Alice's words came harsher than she intended.

James flinched at her tone.

"I was just..." He cleared his throat. "Let's just say the linguistic breach between me and the cargo inspector caused some curious misunderstandings that prolonged the whole process. We just finished a few minutes ago."

"Didn't Tom help you?"

"He did, but his Chinese is hardly better than mine, so I dismissed him and the rest of the crew."

"If your Chinese hinders you efficacy, then you should be studying it instead of dozing off." Alice sentenced. "The same goes to the others. Where are they?"

James scratched one of his sideburns.

"I'm not sure. Probably in a bar nearby..."

"Wonderful." Alice stomped her feet. "I bet they know how to order drinks more fluently than in English."

James didn't say a thing for a while.
The silence allowed Alice to calm down, if just a little.

"What's wrong?" James was now at her side. He was also staring at the sea.

"Nothing."

"You can tell me."

Alice bit her lower lip. She had longed to be alone ever since she had gotten off the train.

But now…

"The Ambassador said this is the last time he does business with our company." She sighed. It was like taking the world off her shoulders. Though she couldn't say she felt better, at least Alice had obtained some relief.

James had to hide his surprise. It wasn't the news he had expected to hear.

"Why? You've been working with him since you first arrived here." James looked at Alice. "Has he lost his good sense for business… or was he drunk?"

Alice laughed a little at his suggestion.

"No. He just said that he doesn't want to be associated with a perturbed woman like me. That it could hurt his company's image."

Jame's ears became red. It happened every time he got mad. It didn't make him intimidating at all, but Alice appreciated his concern.

"How dare he!" Hissed James, genuinely enraged.

"The news about my little stay at the Asylum travel faster and farther than I thought." Alice rubbed here temples and closed her eyes. "Don't get me wrong, breaking our association with him is a loss for our company…but we can survive it. This isn't what angers me."

"Then, what is it?" Asked James in a softer manner.

Alice swallowed before answering.

"He said he'd always known it would come to this, that it was only a matter of time before the stress of being on a ship drove a woman to hysteria. That it was natural, and I had nothing to be ashamed of. He said it with so much condescendence that I could almost feel him patting my head, as if I was a little girl."

James clenched his jaw and fists. If only the rules of etiquette didn't forbid violence against ambassadors….

"I understand why he is disconcerted about the whole matter, but it's as if he had assumed I would fail from the beginning."

"Alice..."

"And I thought he actually believed in me, all these years... that he took me seriously. " Muttered Alice. "I'm on the other side of the world, but I guess some things don't change. Maybe I've been too naïve, thinking that I would ever be able to change someone else's expectations of me other than my own."
The sun was beginning to set.

James didn't know what else to say, even less how to say it.

After considering for a few minutes, he finally gathered enough courage to talk.

"You could have explained to him why you were in the Asylum." He bit his tongue, calling himself an idiot in his mind.

But the damage was done.

Alice laughed without humor.

"And then he would have had his guards put me in a straitjacket." Alice said with sarcasm. "He wouldn't have believed it. No one in this world would."

"I would." James ventured. His heart was thumping.

Alice stopped staring at the sea and looked at James. She sensed no mockery in his voice.

But what were the chances?

"No." She said, without letting her hopes get too high. "You wouldn't."

"Try me." This time, James spoke with total confidence. "Don't assume that I can't."

Alice was left speechless.

For the first time in that day, she smiled without resentment.

"Very well." She said. "But not tonight. I don't want to talk about it right now."

"You just love cliffhangers." Joked James. "But I guess that only will make the story the more interesting once you actually decide to tell it to me. The suspense will be the end of me, Kingsleigh"

"Don't worry, Harcourt. You'll survive."

Above them, fireworks exploded in shades of red, green and golden.

Alice went to the other side of the deck to see where they came from.

"The night market."

"They came out of nowhere!" Said James, walking to where Alice was while looking at the sky."They didn't scare me, though…"

"Let's see what they have for sale." Proposed Alice, with her curiosity overcoming her other ill feelings. "It can also be a chance for you to practice, James."

"As long as I don't end up offending someone's mother while thinking I'm saying hello." Said James with resignation.

"It's part of the learning process." Alice grabbed him by the arm and led him out of the ship. "Come on, you'll see things you'd never seen before."

They crossed the pier while another set of fireworks painted the sky.
Alice didn't forget about her business problem and its implications.

How would she explain it to her mother?

And how many more of her associates would turn their back on her once the news reached them?

She had no way of knowing, but she wouldn't let it dragged her down; she would confront it all when the time came.

Right now, she would explore every corner of the market together with James, and she would make every second count.

The rest were thoughts for another time.

"I don't know why the he milkman wanted to punch me. I just wanted to buy a bottle!"

"You pronounced it wrong, James. What you told him was that you wanted to buy his grandmother."

"Oh god… Remember me never to show my face there again."

The streets were dark and lonely, but their chatter gave some life to their surroundings.

Alice and James had seen many wonderful things to buy, but both returned to their lodgings empty handed.

In their eagerness, they had forgotten they didn't have any money with them. They still had a good time, especially Alice.

Her favorite post belonged to a woman that sold kittens. Alice would have spent her whole time there without regrets, but then James started to sneeze.

After that, they had found the same photographer Alice had seen at the station. He was looking for voluntary models for one last picture, and found his recruits in Alice and James.

When he asked them to pose, Alice began to dance. James had imitated her as best as he could.

To say the photographer had been bewildered by their behaviour would have been an understatement.

"What was the name again? Fruits in basket?"

"The Futterwacken."

"It sounds german, though it isn't like any other dance I've seen. Who taught it to you?"

Alice felt a lump in her throat.

"A friend."

"Don't tell me he's part of the story you owe me."

Alice stopped walking.

"How did you know?"
James looked over his shoulder, and smiled with victory.

"I didn't, I was guessing. That story of yours just keeps getting more interesting."

Alice took a quick glance at the crescent moon. It looked like a smiling cat.

"It is."

James accompanied her to the door of an elegant building. It was the last time the heads of the Kingsleigh and Kingsleigh company would reside there as the Ambassador's guests.

The thought cooled some of Alice's enthusiasm.

She and James said their goodbyes at the entrance.

"Good night, Alice. I hope I get to hear your story soon." Said James with little subtleness.

Alice mused about it.

"We'll see." It was her last verdict. Just to tease James, she added: "I might as well tell you tomorrow."

James nodded and pointed a finger at her while he walked wayward to the crew's lodgings, a few streets away.

"I'll hold you to that."

Once he was gone, Alice entered the building. It was just as she remembered, and she couldn't say anything had changed in her absence.

The traditional decorations, the smell of tea on the air, the quietness…

Everything was in its place.

"Alice!" Helen emerged from one of the rooms like a ghost. "Where have you been?"

Alice almost slipped in her surprise.

"Mother, please don't do that." Alice said, putting a hand on her chest.

After looking at Helen a little more closely, she became truly scared. Her mother's face had aged since she had last seen her in the morning, with the wrinkles around her eyes and on her forehead more visible than Alice could remember.

"What happened?" Inquired Alice, toying with the idea that the rumors had reached her mother too.

It wasn't impossible.

Among merchants, news traveled faster than a spark in gunpowder.

Her mother grabbed her hand and took her inside the room.

Her hand was cold.

"Look, about what happened with the Ambassador." Alice began, deciding it was best to get over with the matter once and for all. "We'll get over it. He is not the only- "
But her mother didn't listen to her.

"There's someone you need to see." Helen explained in a somber manner, sliding another door that led to the other part of the room.

In there, someone was kneeling in front of a tea table.

The figure had long golden hair, identical to Alice's and her mother.

The stranger's legs trembled as she stood up.

Alice felt how her heart sunk to her feet.

Her mother needn't make any introductions.

"Alice." Said the other, her voice at the brink of breaking.

"Margaret."

The two sisters embraced. In the past they hadn't always been glad to see each other, and fought more often than not.

But now they were together, after years of not seeing each other.

Margaret began to weep, and Alice held her tight.

That was enough to end her day in a brighter note, Alice thought.

It hadn't been perfect, but now she couldn't say it all had been in vain either.

In a sense, it had been like Time: it had taken a great deal away from her, but it had also given her back much more in return.
Hollow Crown

All of Witzend waited in absolute silence for the arrival of the queens.

There was barely any room left in the throne hall to move. People stood next to each other, closer than anyone with the same sense of personal space would have enjoyed. They stepped on each other's feet, and sometimes, on the smaller creatures.

The most cunning among them had found shelter on top of the taller ones. Soon, everyone had either a monkey or tadpoles clinging to their heads.

Tarrant and his family were behind the multitude, with their red hair and pink hats forming a line that outstood among the rest.

Next to them was Mallymkum, sitting down on Bayard's back.

The hound and his family wore pink collars. His children, no longer small pups, whined and licked their noses.

A little further to the left was Mc Twisp. He wore a royal waistcoat and held a trumpet in his hand. He checked his clock every second. Each time, he muttered a faint "Oh dear."

Thackery was on Pimlick's arms. They trembled and blabbered things too fast to understand.

They both had been equally anxious when they arrived, with Pimlick biting his nails and Thackery pulling his long ears around his face, while his eyes moved inside his sockets without control.

Tarrant didn't know if it was Thackery who had jumped to Pimlick's arms or if his brother had picked Thackery up, but the two nervous wrecks seemed to calm each other down.

"It's a tizzy day in Underland today." Chessur materialized around Tarrant's shoulders and rested his head on his paws. Tarrant could see his eternal smile with the corner of his eye. "Tizzy with a chance of chaos."

"Chessur, you are late." Mally scolded him.

"Of course I am. I didn't want to come." A small purr accompanied his laughter. "And I dare to say the same about half of Witzend."

"And you wouldn't be wrong." Tarrant whispered to his ear.

"You should have been here on time! We can't let anything go wrong." Insisted Mally.

"I would have been on Time, but I don't see him nearby." Chessur looked around the hall, wagging its tail close to Tarrant's face. It tickled his nose. "Looks like he didn't come. Time is indeed wise."

His grim chuckle sent shivers down the spine of every Witzender nearby. Pimlick hugged Thackery as if Undelrand's fate depended on it.

The hare had a fit of lunatic laughing.

Mally reprimanded Chessur again.

Tarrant sneezed.
"Enough!" Zanik and Bayard hushed them.

Zanik's stern eyes made everyone fall back in line. Even Chessur hesitated about continuing to express his opinions out loud.

"The Big Head hasn't arrived yet, and we are already falling back into tyranny." He whispered to Tarrant as a joke, but the hatter didn't find it funny at all and shook the cat off his shoulders.

Chessur kept floating above their heads, as calm and indifferent as if he was in the middle of a tea party.

Mc Twisp ears rose up and twitched. His jaw dropped and his watch almost fell from his hand.

Echoes came from the staircase next to the thrones, and a shadow became visible.

"They are here." Said Mc Twisp, and he dashed towards the front of the royal hall.

He was the first to notice, but it didn't take long before the rest of the guests knew of the inevitable presence of the queens.

The little tadpoles stayed close to their parents, while the codfishes hid their children inside their mouths.

One of Bayard's sons started to growl and show his fangs. His father had to bit him gently in the neck to calm him down.

"She is here. Snicker-snack, ant farm. Tiny, tiny things. She loves the tiny, tiny things!" Pimlick dropped Thackery down and tried to step back. His eyes were lost into the distance.

Bumalig grabbed her brother and tried to calm him down. She whispered soothing words to him. Her mother, nephew Bim and grandfather Paloo went to her aid, and together they managed to keep Pim's delusions at bay.

Tarrant tried to go to his brother's side, but his father held him back.

"It's going to be alright, Tarrant. We have to endure this." Perhaps his father was madder than he was. Tarrant found no other explanation for Zanik's reasoning. "Just hang in there, son."

And he was trying.

His mother, his father, his siblings, his nephew and grandfather…

Oh, if only they knew how hard Tarrant tried.

Then it happened.

Iracebeth emerged from the staircase and entered the hall. Her presence was announced by Mc Twisp's trumpet, but not even the jolly melody could counter the chilling atmosphere that followed her.

Her head hadn't gotten any bigger, but it hadn't gotten any smaller either. Her crimson dress had a tail so long Tarrant thought it could reach the Outlands and beyond. The Tweedles, clad in red uniforms, entered the hall carrying the final remnants of the dress.

Iracebeth sat down on the throne next to the Unicorn statue. She raised her head high as she looked at the Witzenders, as if her eyes couldn't endure the sight of such scum.
Mc Twisp smiled to the audience and kept playing, in an attempt to bring some cheer, some applause, some anything to the Witzenders and the queen.

"Silence!" shouted Iracebeth, punching the throne with her fist multiple times, like a judge in a turbulent trial. "Off with your scandal, idiot!"

Mc Twisp became so scared that he fainted right in spot, and a guard had to carry him for the rest of the celebration.

Iracebeth didn't notice.

She snapped her fingers.

"Fat Boys, to my feet!"

Tweedledee and Twedleedum complied. They fought over who was supposed to kneel down under each foot.

Iracebeth laughed and forced them to shut up by stomping their heads with her heels.

"I love my Fat Boys. There's nothing like some twits degrading themselves for the sake of my entertainment." She laughed again, as if she had told the funniest joke Witzend had ever heard.

Nobody joined her.

This she noticed, and she didn't like it.

At all.

"Iraci!"

With soft steps and gentle movements, Mirana entered the hall. She wore a simple but elegant white dress, with a pink pattern in the form of spades and clovers. Her face was brimming with joy.

She smiled at the people of Witzend, who cheered and applauded her with great energy.

However, Mirana's happiness evaporated and transformed into indignation when she saw the two Tweedles under her sister's feet. She told them to go and join the rest of the Witzenders, but Iracebeth claimed they were her Fat Boys, and would only leave when she saw fit.

The sisters battled in silence with their eyes.

People held their breaths. The guards, though stoic in appearance, felt no less fear.

'This cannot be good' Thought Tarrant, shaking his head over and over again. 'No good at all'

After what it felt like an eternity, Iracebeth lifted her feet off the Tweedles and, with a kick in their buttocks, told them they were dismissed.

"I told you I was supposed to be on the right." said Tweedledee to Tweedledum.

"No, it was the other way around."

The twins continued their dispute as they joined the multitude.

Mirana took a deep breath and sat down in the throne next to the Lion statue.
She put her feelings aside and carried on with her role as Queen.

"Witzenders, people of Underland." Her voice, smooth as silk, reached everyone's ears without the need to shout. "As you all know, my sister Iracebeth has long given up her evils ways, and now she seeks to atone for her crimes. We gain nothing if we cling to the past; in fact, our world might be destroyed if we cling too tightly to it…But I digress. Today is the start of a new era for Underland, an era where Crims and Marmoreal rule together, not as separates realms, but as the unified whole they were always meant to be. Our new beginning is at hand, but it must come to us with curtsey and reason. And how can there be either in a realm where there are two queens, but just one crown?"

She moved her hands. A purple energy surrounded her fingers, and out of nowhere, the royal crown appeared in front of her.

The Witzenders were in awe.

Mirana put the crown on her head.

"It is for this reason, my faithful people, that I-"

"Silence. You speak too much and say too little." Iracebeth's face was red. "Cut to the chase. Come foward, Hightopp Clan!"

All eyes were on Tarrant and his family.

It brought back dark memories.

They felt real.

Tarrant now knew he didn't need the chronosphere at all to travel back in time.

"HIGHTOPPS!" Iracebeth's breath blew across the throne hall like an upcoming storm.

Pim imitated Mc Twisp and passed out. His final words were tiny, tiny things. Bumalig and Tyva put his arms around their shoulders and held him up.

Zanik looked at his family.

His wife and daughter had to look after his eldest son.

Bim was too young.

Paloo was too old.

Tarrant hated the queen more than anyone.

No, he had to take the initiative. It was his responsibility as head of the clan.

"Father?" Tarrant watched his father go alone to Iracebeth's throne.

He tried to go with him, but Bim and Paloo stopped him.

Mally, Bayard and Thackery helped them keep Tarrant in check.

"Don't leave me waiting! Off with your disobedience!" Iracebeth's order now seemed more like a tantrum.
"Iracebeth, enough." But Mirana, in spite of her powers and charm, had no control over her sister. It became more obvious with every passing day.

She only calmed down when Zanick was in front of her.

He took his hat off, made a reverence and held his head down.

The red queen smiled. She looked satisfied, entertained even.

"Finally. It took you long enough. Perhaps you need a new clock." Iracebeth spoke to him like she would to a servant. "Kneel down while in my presence, it saves time."

Zanik only had time to put one knee on the ground before Mirana disregarded Iracebeth's order.

"There's no need to do so, Mister Hightopp." She said to Zanik with a gentle smile.

She then glared at her sister.

Iracebeth's veins pulsedated in her forehead with every beat of her furious heart.

Zanik, torn apart between his queens, remained with his left knee on the ground. His back soon began to hurt; he could only hope that, whatever he was meant to do, it wouldn't take long.

"Fine, don't save Time! I no longer have interest in him anyway." Iracebeth pursed her lips.

"Zanik Hightopp." Said Mirana. Her voice nullified his sister's. "Before we can move on to the new Era of Underland, there's something Iracebeth must tell to the Hightopp clan. I hope that you and your family find some comfort in this small gesture that we-"

"I forgive you." Iracebeth snapped.

Zanik looked at her with confusion.

Mirana was as shocked as the Witzenders.

The red queen pointed her finger at the red haired line on the back. It redirected all the attention back to Tarrant and his family.

"I forgive you all for having ruined my coronation, and for causing Underland's downfall as a result." Iracebeth explained, so convinced of her words that a couple of Witzenders almost agreed with her judgment. "Witzenders, do not blame them, for idiots cannot foresee the consequences of their actions. You may rest peacefully now, Hightopps, knowing your queen has granted you her invaluable pardon."

"And we accept it humbly." answered Zanik, lowering his head more.

Something inside Tarrant, that had begun to break ever since his father knelt, was now completely destroyed.

His breathing increased, dark rings appeared under his golden eyes.

"Tarrant." His grandfather begged. "Please..."

But Iracebeth gave no rest to her audience. She talked so quickly that Mirana had no time to stop her.

"But I don't want your words; I want a real proof. You shall craft to me the most wonderful, royal
crown in the history of Underland. Until the day that crown rests on my head, I shall only take your repentance half-heartedly."

"Of course, you're Majesty." Agreed Zanik.

Iracebeth offered her hand to him.

"Kiss it." She said. "And be grateful."

"We are grateful."

Zanik held her hand gently. In his heart, he wanted to crush it like a tiny ant.

He had just put the tip of his lips on the royal hand when a voice boomed in the hall.

"NO!"

It was furious and scottish.

The queens and Witzenders looked at the hatter. He was standing on top the heads of his nephew and grandfather. Without a warning, he ran towards Iracebeth, using hats, heads, and tails of monkeys as his floor.

"Tarrant, wait!" cried Mally one last time.

He didn't stop.

"Oh no." Chessur disappeared from the palace, sensing the chaos that was about to befall upon it.

People grunted in pain as Tarrant passed over them, stomping their heads with his boots, but he didn't care.

Two guards tried to stop him, but Tarrant dodged them with a jump. He landed next to his father, and forced him back to his feet.

Zanik grunted at the aggressive touch of his son.

He looked at him.

He had seen Tarrant angry before, but never like this.

It was as if he was another man.

Zanik backed down, afraid.

Iracebeth panicked and ordered the guards to attack. Mirana called the order off and went to Tarrant's side.

She put her hand on his cheek and called his name, but to no avail.

All Tarrant could think about was of the gall of the Bloody Big Head. After all she had done, all the suffering she had caused to them, and she still delighted in humiliating his family…

"Is this the Queen that will lead us to a New Age?" he asked with an equal mix of mockery and hatred. The Witzenders listened closely to him. "Oh, she shall…. But it will be an Age of horovendoush disarray, dark as the Crow's wings and destructive as the Jaberwocky's fire. People
like you are no capable of bringing happiness to this land, you .. you Bloddy-

"My queens, watch out!" cried the guard with Mc Twisp in his arms.

The glass behind the thrones shattered into a thousand of pieces, and a group of frenzied borogoves infested the hall.

One of them landed on Iracebeth’s head and began to plucked her hair. She tried to scare it off, but her hands didn’t reach the top of her head.

A group of them formed a moving circle around Mirana, greeting her again and again.

Soon, the whole hall became a pink, fluffy mess of borogoves chasing the Witzenders around. The Hightopp clan became their favorite target, with their pink hats catching their attention.

"Hey!" Said a borogove to Tarrant. "Hi!"

He slapped him away. It was the first of many.

Tarrant slapped every borogove and Wiztender he found in his way to the entrance. He couldn’t bear to stay one more second in that place; it reeked of Iracebeth's poisonous words.

He thought they would stop haunting once he was out in the fresh air.

He was wrong.

"Son." Zanik was out of breath. He had lost his hat somewhere in his escape from the borogoves.

"Wait, listen to me."

But Tarrant didn't want to. He couldn't.

He tried to walk away from his father, but Zanik was more persistent than he thought.

"You have to understand."

"I understand perfectly what she was trying to do." Tarrant turned around and faced his father.

"Maybe it's you who must consider what you are doing, father."

"I was obeying my queen." Zanik's own temper was starting to flourish.

"You were yielding to a tyrant! Don't you remember all the dark years she brought upon Underland?"

"Years I spent trapped in an Ant Farm."

"And whose fault was that, father? Tell me!"

"Mine, it was mine!" Zanik screamed. Tarrant's eyes and face went back to normal at the sight of his father crying. When was the last time he had seen him shed tears?

Had he ever?

"The day of the coronation, it was me who broke the crown. The crown I made with my own hands." The lump in his throat distorted most of Zanik's words. "If I hadn't, then maybe none of this would have happened, but I..."
"Father, no."

"Forgive me, son. I disappointed you, I disappointed our whole family." Zanik walked towards Tarrant and embraced him. "I will make things right, I promise. Can you grant me the chance to prove it to you?"

Slowly but firmly, Tarrant departed from his father's arms.

"You needn't prove anything, father. Not to me, and especially not her." Tarrant took several steps backwards. Being angry at his father was much easier than seeing him so miserable.

He couldn't endure it.

"I will make that crown." Said Zanik, regaining some of his composure. "And then everything will be alright."

"It won't." Tarrant whispered. "Not like this."

"Tarrant."

"I'm sorry."

"Tarrant!"

He left him there, and didn't look back.

Tarrant ran through the empty streets of Witzend. His pink hat fell from his head at one point.

Everything was pink.

He wanted to escape from that hideous color.

Before he realized it, he was back at his family's shop. He had no place there, not now that his father was determined to crown the royal red head.

He had to leave, for the sake of his family and his own.

He felt something under his feet. He had stepped on a hat.

His gyre-hat.

Tarrant picked it up.

"Away." He chanted as she spun on his heels time and time again. "Away from here."

He spun one last time as he jumped in the air, and threw the hat without letting it go. He was off like a shot.

Witzend became distant and tiny in the matter of seconds, but Tarrant couldn't see it. He kept his eyes closed the whole time.

"Away." He repeated as the gyre-hat dragged him across the clouds. "Away from here."

He had thrown it with so much strength that his journey felt eternal.

Was he destined to never again return back down? , he thought, and realized he wouldn't mind so much if he was.
"Away from here." He was starting to lose altitude. It was better to prepare for the landing.

Tarrant didn't.

"And closer to her...closer to..."

The crash came.

His world went black.

Kaput.

"Alice!"

_Tarrant was back in the palace of dreams. He didn't waste his time searching around._

_He stood in one place, shouting with all the power of his lungs._

"ALICE!"

_An echo, barely more than a whisper, reached his ear._

_Tarrant screamed once more. He couldn't stop._

_His Alice had finally come to him, and he had to guide her through the intricate halls of the palace._

_But no one came._

_He was alone._
"Tarrant!"

Alice woke up as suddenly as she had fallen asleep. The scent of paper and ink filled her nostrils. Her head rested against the desk. Documents and letters were scattered all over the surface, rustling against the contact of her hair.

She had a quill in hand. The feather was black.

She straightened against the chair and rubbed her eyes with her knuckles.

The light piercing through the window told her it was late in the afternoon. Her mother's grandfather clock informed that she had been sleeping for two hours, but Alice didn't trust it to give her the right time.

It had belonged to her family since she could remember.

Her mother took it with them in every travel they made. Perhaps she thought of selling it to some foreign merchant, or a clockmaker interested in an useless clock to dismantle and find some use for the separate pieces.

It was a wonderful machine, but a problematic one as well; sometimes its hands pointed at tea time when it was really time for breakfast, its pendulum swung without a rhythm, and it ticked and stroke erratically, as if it followed its own will rather than the mechanism of its cogs.

Its chaotic design had never bothered Alice, but now it'd had a bad timing.

It had woken her up from her dream, one much muchier than the others.

If she went back to sleep at once, would she return to the same dream again?

She wondered.

"Alice?" Someone knocked at the door. It was her mother.

Alice steeled herself and put her pursuit of dreams to a halt. She still had problems of her own, and had to find a way to solve them.

It was her responsibility as captain of her crew and as a member of her family.

She opened the door of her room and let Helen in. Her mother had rings under her eyes, and a nerve on her jaw pulsated like a heart. Her hair had rebellious white threads escaping from the otherwise perfect ponytail.

She was dressed as elegantly as usual.

"More correspondence." Helen said dryly. In her hand she was holding a pack of letters from countries of the West and the East.

She stopped at the sight of the disorganized desk where her daughter had been working.

And sleeping.
Helen looked at Alice, more tired than angry.

Alice shrugged, and felt no pride in having lost herself in the palace of dreams. At the same time, she felt no shame.

She had spent most of the night awake, talking to Margaret and listening to her stories of her ill-fated travels.

She'd had returned early from her missionary activities in Africa after receiving a letter from her husband Lowell, informing her of their already official divorce.

When she arrived to London, Margaret found that her husband wasn't joking around, and there was a new Lady Manchester by his side. To add to her misery, she also found her family's home in the Ascot's claws, while her remaining relatives were sailing to distant lands.

Her whole world had turned topsy-turvy from one moment to another. Alice was surprised Margaret had found her way to China after all the turmoil, and she was even more amazed she had managed to find her and their mother.

Margaret was more resourceful than she thought.

"How is my sister?" asked Alice, trying to organize some of the mess on the desk. She spilled a small ink jar over the letter of an associate merchant in Hong Kong. It was filled with questions and demands of an explanation about her little episode in the Asylum.

"She needs to rest." Helen took her handkerchief and helped Alice clean the ink. "These are bad times for her, but she'll recover. She is mine and Charles's daughter, after all."

"If I had known she would come back to London so soon …"

"We had no way of knowing." Helen had the desk ordered before Alice could notice. She had always been good in doing things fast and efficiently, with such low effort that she made everything look easy. "Just as she couldn't have guessed Lowell would decide to find comfort in other woman's arms while she was away. Bastard!"

In any other situations, Alice would have laughed.

It was seldom that her mother cursed in a blunt way. She much preferred concealed quips or subtle accusations.

But Margaret's situation was anything but laughable.

Alice swallowed.

If she had told her sister of Lowell's true nature when she'd had the chance, would she still be in that situation?

'I have no way to know', she concluded, though it did little to silence the guilty voice whispering in her mind.

"But she is here now." Her mother said. "We are together, that's what matters."

Alice knew her mother's words were also directed at her. Ever since she had told her all about the Ambassador decision that morning, Helen had showed a nonchalant attitude towards her daughter.

Not angry, just silent, too silent.
To make things worse, letters from angered associates had showered upon Alice without mercy from the moment the sun rose. Not all were as trenchant as the Ambassador, but neither were they as kind and forgiving to give Alice a moment of peace from her worries.

Her left index and thumb were calloused and covered with ink after hours of holding the quill, signing letter after letter without a rest.

She'd had no time to mind her other duties at the port together with her crew.

Alice had left most of those matters in James’ hands. With the help of Tom and the rest of the sailors, she knew he would be fine.

"What's the word from our associates?" asked Helen.

"We lost three in India, and a couple more in Hong Kong." Alice informed as neutrally as she could. "As for London… the number of deserters keeps growing."

"It's natural; that's where the whole thing started. Their mouths must be full of gossip as we speak."

"Some are willing to have a meeting and see if we can reach some sort of agreement. I'll see it through as soon as we get there." Alice said, with the bad feeling they would behave in a very similar manner than Hamish.

Her associates however, were reasonable for the most part. She just hoped her absence wouldn't grant them the opportunity to change their judgment.

"I shall go with you". Offered her mother. Alice nodded and agreed.

"There's something else." Alice looked for a letter among her already signed papers. She showed it to her mother. It had an address written in English, with a handwriting that revealed its author as a man of high status.

"It's from the gentleman that owed the carriage that I borrowed." Alice knew she was taking some liberties with her choice of verb.

"And what does he want?" asked Helen, with her concern accentuating her age.

"A full payment for the loss of the carriage."

"But you left it at the Ascot's mansion. Can't he go and get it back?"

"Apparently, the Ascots claim the carriage was never inside their property." Alice imagined Hamish making up a big tale with her as the villain. He would tell it to the gentleman, who would believe his words without a second thought.

Then, at night, free from all witnesses, Hamish would drive the carriage across the fields of his mansion, together with his mother, wife and child.

But Alice had no time to waste. Hamish and his family weren't worthy of a second of her attention.

What was really important was to pay the old gentleman his carriage, or else he threatened to take the whole matter to the authorities.

If it got out hand, Alice knew there was a big chance she would go out of business too.

She couldn't allow it.
She wouldn't.

"Do we have the money?" asked Helen with a sigh.

Money, money, money…. The world surely moved around it.

"Yes, but we'd have to postpone the crew's payment until our next trip." Alice knew this was the most plausible solution from a practical perspective.

But it was probable it would hurt her in the long run.

Her crew was loyal to her, but they were men with lives and families too.

She couldn't say how much trust left they would have for her if she denied them the money they had earned with their hard work.

It was a tough call, but she was the captain.

To take decisions and live with the consequences, that was her job.

The grandfather clock stroke four times in a row. Its hands had advanced three hours in a few minutes. Helen put her preoccupations aside for a moment and went to check the clock.

It was an useless thing, unable to fulfill its function, and yet she held great affection to it.

"It's old as it is bonkers."She explained to Alice, who looked at her from the desk. "It was the one thing worthwhile your father brought from his first journey… a few years before Margaret was born. I wasn't impressed by it at all, but Charles was so proud of it that I ended up liking it too after a few days."

Alice had never heard the clock's story. She never would have guessed it had much value, even less of the sentimental sort.

Even less for her mother.

Helen was too practical to develop any sentiments towards objects, or so had Alice thought.

"It was one of the few things I never thought of selling to Hamish. It doesn't work right, but it is not a piece of junk without a worth. To the right person, it has great value."

Helen put her hands on the clock and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and exhaled.

She looked at his daughter.

"Sell it, Alice. And pay what's due."

Alice felt as if her mother had thrown a bucket of ice cold water to her face.

Her mother's short story hadn't prepared her for that ending.

"No." She answered, unwilling to yield. "I'll find another way, mother. It's my job as-

"Well, I'm also head of the company, am I not? It's also my job to come up with solutions for these problems." Retorted Helen with newly gained energy. "Kingsleigh & Kingsleigh; it is two people, not one. Besides, it's just a clock, there will always be another."
By instinct, Alice's fingers went inside her pocket in search for his father's watch.

She found nothing.

She remembered she had given it away as a gift.

She smiled.

"Yes." Alice went to Helen's side and held her hands. She realized how lucky she was to have her mother by her side. "Thank you, mother."

They left the room together. It was time for dinner, excellent to give Alice a break of a day full of letters and complaints.

Is that the life she would have led had she agreed to work under Hamish' command?

What a miserable existence. She felt some pity for those who, besides dealing with horrendous amount of monotonous work, had also to deal with the Ascot tyrant.

Someone knocked at the door at the moment Alice and her mother walked across the hallway.

It was James. The sun had started to tan his skin. It gave him the semblance of a experienced sailor.

He was holding a box with small holes.

He greeted Alice and Helen with a reverence.

When he was alone with Alice, he acted like his normal self, like the true James, but whenever Helen was present, it was as if he was suddenly in the presence of the Queen and had to put on a mask of extreme politeness, like a courtier in a royal ball.

Alice had told him several times he had no need to show so much curtsey, that her mother wouldn't be offended, but the habit was too rooted in James' mind for him to change it all of a sudden.

Perhaps, Alice thought, it was the natural consequence of working for the Ascots for so long. Alice was grateful James had abandoned them before they could change him into another person.

He informed her of the status of the crew and the ship's supplies. Underneath his solemn tone, Alice could hear a touch of cockiness in his voice.

He had made sure everything was prepared for their next journey, from the food storage to the ammo cabinets.

The refreshments of the port and the nearby distractions had cleared the crew's minds and reestablished their spirits, and they were ready to follow their captain onwards the next destination.

He had also had the Kingsleigh & Kingsleigh cleaned from mast to lower desk.

"Tom didn't like the idea at first, but he obeyed when I reminded him I spoke with your authority." James said. "I'm not telling on him, though."

He jerked his head to the right and sneezed.

And sneezed again.

They were almost as erratic as the clock's strikes.
Helen put a hand on his forehead.

Alice smiled at the sight of James' expression.

"I think you are getting a cold. I'll go make you some tea." She looked at him with the tenderness of a mother hen. "Oh, my dear boy."

Alice had to bit her lip to stop a burst of laughter.

Helen went to the kitchen in spite of James' multiples claims of his good health.

It probably would have worked if every two words he said weren't followed by a sneeze.

"You know James, you were actually looking like a true sea wolf until this moment." Alice teased him. "A dear sea wolf boy."

James pretended to laugh.

"How rude of you. And to think I was going to give you something, but now…"

"What is it?"

"No, I'm insulted. The Harcourt's gift to Kingsleigh is officially canceled."

"Come on, don't make me write you an apology. I've written so many today I could fill a library."

James pretended to give great thought to the matter, and two seconds later, he handed the box to Alice.

She accepted with amusement and a touch of shyness.

"It's for you." He said, wondering in his mind why he was stating the obvious.

Alice laughed, and James assumed it was because she thought the whole situation was stupid.

But it was free of malice, even of the friendly sort.

"Thank you, James." She said with honest gratitude, and this relieved James from his fears.

She opened it up and found …

Nothing.

It was just a box with some dust inside.

That wasn't what she had expected at all.

It was a surprising gift indeed.

"A box…" Alice muttered, but changed her tone when she noticed James had heard her. "A box! It's just what I needed to archive the letters. This is quite sensible from you, James. Thank you again."

"A box, of course." James stopped and frowned. "What?"

He looked inside the box, his eyes became wide with disappointment, followed immediately by fear.
"No, this isn't what I..." He explained, pronouncing the words too closely together. He sneezed before he continued. "But where-?"

A scream came from the room upstairs. Helen attended to it with such promptitude that she left the tea boiling and forgotten. She climbed the stairs two steps at a time.

"Margaret!" She exclaimed.

Alice reacted at the name of her sister and went after her mother after putting the box down on the floor.

James hadn't grasped the situation, but he still followed them.

The three of them found Margaret, still dressed in her sleeping gown, cornered in the left side of the bed.

She embraced her legs and had a disgusted expression in her face, as if she had seen…

"A rat!" She explained to her mother when she went to her side to comfort her. "It was enormous, mother. It touched my forehead with its nose and licked me!"

"I'll go get a broom." James said, considering the option of getting a gun too, just in case the rat was too big.

He sneezed.

Scratching sounds came from under the bed.

Margaret tried to leave the room, but Alice stopped her.

"Don't worry, I've got this." She patted her sister's back

Alice knelt down in front of the bed and searched under with her hand.

"Alice, no!" Screamed Helen and James in unison.

"Found it." Announced Alice, dragging the animal by one of its paws.

It turned to be not a rat, but a kitten.

It trembled in Alice's arms like a beggar in winter.

"A dangerous beast." Alice softly caressed the animal's ears. "Am I right, James?"

If it was true that the first impression was the most important, and that it defined someone's opinion of you, then James was forever cursed to be a total nitwit in Margaret's eyes.

She was having dinner with her mother. James was invited, but he was too ashamed to accept and left before Helen asked him again.

Alice had gone after him, and both were now outside the entrance, sitting down underneath a barren sky.

The kitten played in the empty streets with a ball of paper, not too far away from them.

"I should go and apologize again." said James.
"You've already apologized ten times." Said Alice, a little tired of his concern. "You woke Margaret up and got her off bed for the first time this day. You did no harm. And trust me, she'll be able to look back at this and laugh someday."

"Someday being soon or...?"

"Later than sooner, but better than never."

"That's good to hear." He snorted with sarcasm.

"Stop worrying so much. It's not like we are going to fire you over this."

"That's no excuse for my incompetence." He looked distraught. This was a first time for Alice. "I made a fool out of myself at the port today. Matters that should've taken me minutes took me hours. And then I come here and cause a scandal. I can't even find Polaris in the sky... some first mate I am turning out to be."

"Your chinese is not great and the stars will never be your best map. So what? The first you can practice and the second is not a must. Besides, I will continue helping you with both, as I've been doing since your first day. Just give yourself time."

James didn't answer. Alice remained next to him.

The kitten eventually got bored and approached them. It rubbed herself against James' ankle.

Alice thought he would kick the kitten away, but he held her gently and raised her far away from his face.

"As for you..." He said to the kitten in a fake angry tone, shaking her a little. "You got me into all this, little rascal. What do you have to say in your defense?"

The kitty purred.

"A great speaker." James said to Alice, and then he sneezed.

Alice took the kitten from him and placed her in her lap. The small animal fell asleep at the warm touch of her master's clothes.

"What are you going to call her?" James asked. "How about Mao?"

"Then you would be naming my cat 'Cat' in another language."

"I know. Witty, isn't it?"

"Well, at least you are practicing chinese."

Both laughed.

"There are no stars, and you don't have your charts with you." Alice looked up and scratched the kitten's head. "So I guess we can focus solely in your chinese tonight."

"Actually, there was something else I wanted us to talk about." Said James with determination.

"What is it?" asked Alice, a little worried about the turn of the conversation.

"Your story."
"What?"

"Well, you did say there was a chance would tell it to me tonight. And I was hoping that... you would."

For a moment, Alice's happiness overwhelmed her reluctance

She could count with her fingers the number of people with whom she had shared her story, two of them being her mother and sister; but she only needed a finger to count the person that had believed her without a patronizing attitude or out of motherly obligation.

Would James join her father in that group?

For this, she had a way to know.

The grandfather clock stroke.

It woke the kitten up. Alice remembered how she had woken up in the same way, just when she had heard his voice from far away.

This killed any motivation she had of sharing her story with James.

A part of her felt that she wouldn't be able to share it with anybody until she met him again.

Until then, the conversation had nowhere else to go.

"It's getting late." She said, cradling the kitten in her arms and standing up.

James imitated her.

"Of course."

"It was a long day for the two of us, we better get some sleep. Good night, James."

"Good night, Alice." James said. After walking two steps forward, he turned around. "I'm sorry; I wasn't trying to upset you."

"You didn't."

"Very well."

It was true. He had brought up the topic, but the wound opened up on its own. James didn't seem convinced that he hadn't, but decided to leave it as it was.

He dragged his feet and went on his way. The sight of him stung Alice.

James was a good man, a good friend.

One of the few she'd ever had outside Underland.

Maybe, she thought, she was being too defensive.

It wouldn't hurt to try and give him a chance.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

James stopped and turned on his heels.
"What?"

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

James hesitated and mumbled to himself.

"Oh, a joke," He snapped his fingers. "And one of bawdy nature, I assume."

If they had been closer, Alice would have slapped him in the head.

"It's a riddle." She clarified. "Think about the answer and tell me tomorrow."

James tilted his head a bit to the right and folded his arms.

"As you wish, but …" He pointed at the kitten sleeping in Alice's arms. "Now here's my petition. Give that cat a good name, and tell me about it tomorrow, then we'll both have something to think about tonight."

It was fair enough.

"Deal. And by the way, don't go around asking Tom and rest for an answer. You have to find it on your own."

"Alice, do you think I'd ever do that?" Asked James, though it was one of the first things he had considered.

He left, and the riddle kept him awake until past midnight, while his fellow sailors had longed succumbed to their sleep and snored loudly in their beds.

As for Alice, she continued answering and signing letters until early morning, with her new kitten keeping her company the whole time. When she was finished, she saw no point in going to bed and rested her head against the desk instead.

It was comfortable enough.

She fell asleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

The grandfather clock struck, but this time, it failed to wake her up.

That's how deeply she had drowned amidst her dreams.

The nameless kitten woke her up, purring and rubbing against her head.

She stayed next to Alice while the captain washed her face and prepared for a new day.

Someone knocked at the door when she had just finished putting on new clothes.

Helen and Margaret were still sleeping, so Alice had to answer.

She knew who it was, and hoped he hadn't come up with an answer yet. She first had to find a name for the kitten.

"Rise and shine, mister Harcourt." Greeted Alice.

But the lad in front of her was too young and spoke chinese too well to be James. Alice recognized him; he was the same servant she had abandoned at the station.
"Good morning." Said Alice in his language, wondering if he held some resentment towards her.

If he did, he didn't show it, and he handed a letter to Alice before she could apologize to him. It had the Ambassador's crimson seal: the symbol of the dragon.

"It's urgent, captain." The boy said dryly. He added nothing more and waited patiently as Alice opened the letter and read it.

What was written in the letter changed her plans for the rest of the day.

She couldn't say if it was for better or worse, but she didn't have to wonder about it.

She would find out soon enough.

That was her duty, after all.
Snowflakes began to accumulate on his eyelashes.

His teeth chattered, and his breath came out in the form of small clouds.

Tarrant put one last handful of ice inside his bag, it was made of red creepers.

His bones screamed in pain.

If he didn't move at once, he would become a giant Popsicle with a hat on top.

"A warming hat." He said as he forced his legs to move. He rubbed his arms with his hands. The landscape became less white and grayer the further he walked. The small snow sheets that had formed on his kneecaps shattered and formed an icy path below him.

"That shall be my next creation. But how will it produce heat? Maybe it can have burning logs stuffed inside; that way, the wearers can burn marshmallows while they get warm! It would be like having a campfire on your head… and a fire in your hair."

He needed to polish a few details, but he liked the concept.

More importantly, a warming hat was more of a necessity than a whim. He needed one if he wanted to endure his daily expeditions across the Outlands, especially when they took him to the gelid mountains near the frontier.

He stopped for a moment and looked into the distance. He still had a long way to go.

The temptation of using his Gyre Hat almost overtook him, but Tarrant decided to keep walking instead.

There was no hurry in getting back to the castle anyway. Though not as cold as the skirts of the mountains, the rest of the Outlands was a chilling, windy place, as if winter and autumn had fused into a new season where nothing could grow and prosper.

The ice inside his bag wouldn't melt so quickly.

More importantly, his legs needed to get stronger, his body more resistant.

He wouldn't last long in his new home otherwise.

He scratched his forehead and flinched. It was easy to forget the big bump his last landing had given him when he had so much else to think about.

"How would it create heat? And how will I craft it in the first place, if I don't have any silk or needles with me?" Tarrant bit his nails in excitement, trying to keep his mind busy and far away from his situation. It worked well. "I wonder if I can use these bloody red creepers. Yes, yes, let's try it! As long as they are not pink. It is a vile color, more than red, it truly is…"

A group of fruit people sowed seeds in the Outlands' unforgiving ground. They unrooted weeds and broke the frozen earth.

One of them oversaw the process from the entrance of the castle.
Tarrant approached her as he watched the workers, and wished that their harvest would finally produce something alive.

"Here's your daily ice delivery, my fresh green lady!" Tarrant made a reverence and kissed the fruit soldiers' hand. "And let my add that you look absolutely ravishing today!"

"Stop it." The soldier flustered and put a hand on her cheek.

Tarrant spent some more time making remarks of the same sort, accompanying each with another reverence and kiss.

She laughed every time.

They seemed to make her happy. It was the least Tarrant could do for his host; he didn't know if he would have survived his first days in the Outlands if it hadn't been for her and the rest of Iracebeth's fruit army.

If there was anything good and worthwhile that the Big Head had and would ever add to Underland, Tarrant knew it was them.

Once compliment time was over, they went together inside the red heart-shaped castle. It still reeked of humidity and was crawling with blue bugs, but the fruit people had added a more upbeat atmosphere to it, with tones of green and vegetable decorations in every wall.

They had also removed the heads of their fallen comrades that didn't survive their service under Iracebeth' tyrannical fist.

It was just one more reason for Tarrant to dread the Bloody Big Head.

After climbing numerous stairs, falling into a hole once and getting lost a couple of times in the organic corridors, they reached the Red Queen's former chamber. It now belonged to the Ravishing Schnozzless Soldier.

It was fitting. She was the closest thing the fruit people had for a leader, and she had proven to be more than capable for the job.

"Come here. It finally happened!" She grabbed Tarrant by the hand and led him to a desk. It was the same desk where he had found the Ant farm, but now, rather than a small prison, it had a small flowerpot filled with humid earth. It laid right on a spot where the dim light touched it. "Look!"

Tarrant saw a small sprout hatching from the soil, and he couldn't help but to smile from ear to ear.

"At last! My most frabjous congratulations." He spread his arms and tried to hug the Ravishing Soldier, but he fell flat on the floor. She was too busy putting the ice in a watering can and feeding the sprout the few drops that came out.

Ice took a lot of time to melt in the Outlands, sometimes an entire day. It was also the only nourishment the fruit people needed to survive, other than the few sunbeams that managed to get through the Outland's eternally clouded sky.

In his first days after crashing at the red castle like a falling star, Tarrant was fed only bowls of freezing water. To his good fortune, he discovered the red creepers were edible. Their taste was nauseating, but they also were as filling as a banquet, and killed his hunger for days.

Eating wasn't as enjoyable for Tarrant anymore, but if he was to live with the fruit people for an
undetermined period of time, he'd better get used to it.

Tarrant stood up, dusted off his clothes and watched his friend water the tiny bud. She did it lovingly and with great care. He would have gladly watched that scene for hours, but he had things to do.

"Time to get a good sleep! You know where to find me if you need me." He stretched. Before he left, he grabbed the flowerpot and patted the sprout with his finger. "Good night, little buddy. May you grow fast and healthy so we can play together one day!"

"It will happen." Smiled the Schnozzless soldier.

He left the room and went to the roofless top of the castle, where the fruit people had improvised some sort of room for him, with only one bed made of, what else, red creeps.

Tarrant laid down and put his hands on his chest. He looked at the sky and then at the two thrones in front of him.

One was destroyed, as a result of his crashing landing.

The other was empty.

He had asked for the skeleton of Stayne to be put at rest somewhere outside the castle. The fruit people had thought of it as a honorable gesture from the hatter, almost too noble for them to comprehend.

In reality, there was no honor involved in the whole matter. Tarrant just had wanted it out of his sight.

He already had problems falling asleep in his hardened red bed; the thought of a skeleton watching him didn't help.

Tarrant was starting to think that getting Stayne buried had been in vain. He still couldn't get any sleep. It's not that he couldn't endure a few days more without it; after all, he had the record for the more days in a row without sleeping in all Witzend.

What he truly longed for were his visits to the Palace of Dreams, especially since he'd listened to her voice the last time, even if it was just in the form of a whisper.

"Okay, this is it! This time, I will not fail." Tarrant said, closing his eyes tightly.

Nothing happened.

He then tried to count borogoves flying over a fence. It had always worked when he was a child.

But it was to no avail.

Then he sung himself a lullaby.

"Twinkle, twinkle little bat. How I wonder where you're at…"

His voice was in tune, but he was still awake.

"Perhaps a bed time story will do the trick. Once upon a time…"

He told himself the fable of the Unicorn and the Lion caught in an everlasting battle for the crown. He had fun, and was even surprised by how good of a storyteller he was, and gave himself
congratulations.

That was all too good, but…

"AGHH!" He got up and pulled his hair. Golden covered his eyes as he shouted to the sky. "Why isn't it working?! What am I doing wrong?! Why?!!"

The sky, apparently, became offended at his attitude, and answered back with a strenuous thunder that almost deafened him.

"Geez, no need to get that angry." Said Tarrant, realizing he was giving some advice he certainly didn't follow. Recovering his calmness, Tarrant laid down on the bed again and sighed.

"Why?" He said with a weak voice, so low he could barely hear himself. "Why don't you come back down, Alice? Here, with me."

"Uhm…"

Tarrant opened his eyes and looked at the newcomer. It was the Schnozzless Soldier.

"Hello!" He sat down on the bed and changed his gloominess for happiness. "What can I do for you? Do you need me to get more ice from the mountains?"

"No, we have enough." She hesitated and offered Tarrant a cup of water. "Here."

"Ah, much appreciated!"

Tarrant accepted it with joy, though he didn't have any thirst to quench. He smiled and was expecting her to leave, but instead, she sat next to him.

"Alice. Is she the girl with banana-color hair?" She asked, playing with her thumbs the whole time.

"Indeed she is." Answered Tarrant, trying to hide his mixed feelings. "She is larger than life and twice as natural, if I'm allowed to quote the Lion and the Unicorn's tale."

"And do you miss her?"

Tarrant felt as if someone was squeezing his heart.

"Yes, I do." A short answer, but it summarized his feelings.

"So, why isn't she here with you?"

Strange, thought Tarrant, that questions so simple were so hard to answer.

"Well, she has her family in another place." He pointed at the sky. "Right up there."

"Did they die?" She asked with sudden sadness.

Tarrant put on a blank expression.

"No… They are in Upperland. She is from there."

"Oh, so that's why she can't be here." The Schnozzless concluded. "But…"

Tarrant waited for her to say more, but it soon became obvious that if he didn't talk first, then both would spend an eternity waiting for the other to say something.
"But what?"

"Uhm. It never rains in the Outlands." She said.

Tarrant was taken aback by the change of subject.

"True enough." He said, finding no way to refute the statement. "And yet the sky is always cloudy. Maybe the sky has a cruel sense of humor, don't you think?"

"Yes, that's why we need to get ice from the mountains..." She looked at Tarrant and came closer to him, so close that their eyes were just an inch from touching. "If water doesn't come to us, then we go to the water."

"Well, it truly makes things all the more difficult." Tarrant laughed. "But I guess it also makes it all the more rewarding once you- "

He shut his mouth, realizing the magnitude of the idea his fruit friend had granted him.

Without distancing himself from her face, Tarrant grabbed her by the cheeks.

"Alice can't come to me, not even in our dreams." He said with contained enthusiasm that was about to burst inside his chest. "But maybe I can go to her. Up."

His hair became more orange than fire, his eyes greener than grass.

Without any warning, he hugged the Schnozzless and raised her up until her feet departed from the ground. He then began to dance with her in an impetuous waltz, the two of them jumping and laughing across the room as if all the troubles in Underland had faded away from existence.

For Tarrant, that was almost the case.

After months of being lost, he finally had a path to follow.

He would no longer search for Alice in his dreams; he would no longer lie down and wait for her doing nothing more than sleeping.

It was time for him to act.

But how?

He was proud of his Gyre Hat, but he doubted it could take him up enough to reach Alice.

No, he would need something else. Something that moved quicker than the wind, something that he could control.

A machine.

He needed…

"Of course!" Tarrant's dancing came to a stop. His fruit friend was still laughing in his arms, surrounding his neck with her green arms. "I should have thought of it sooner!"

Very gently, he departed from the embrace and put his hands on her shoulders.

"My Ravishing lady." He said. She looked at him expectantly. "I need you take me to it."
"To what?"

Tarrant whispered it in her ear.

She gasped in fear and had to ask him again to know she hadn't heard wrong.

In the end, she couldn't deny the hatter his wish, and with unpleasant memories invading her mind, she led him through the corridors, towards the place he wanted.

It probably wasn't the most sensible of actions, but that mattered not.

Tarrant was happy.

For her, that was enough.

It took them hours to remove all the creepers from the clock.

It was so infested by them that none of its original black color was visible, and some bugs had nested on top of it.

"You should give some maintenance to it every once in a while!" Suggested Tarrant as he scratched away a caterpillar crawling around the clock's hands. "I don't think there are many of these things lying around, you know. Just this one, and the other one in Mirana's castle. It is valuable, and you could visit him once in a while!"

"Nobody wants to. He is scary." Schnozzless said.

Tarrant could see the fear painted in her face.

"Well, he is just a bit rude, and he is not very patient at times. But he is not so bad after a few tea parties..." Tarrant tried to explain, but his friend didn't listen to him. He didn't know if she couldn't understand him, didn't want to, or if she had memories as proof for her judgement.

"He is scary." She repeated, and Tarrant saw no point in trying to convince her otherwise.

The clock's entrance was finally free from the red plague. A strong blow of wind came out of it after Tarrant opened the pendulum's door.

He adjusted his hat, took a deep breath, clenched his fists...

And in he went.

"Be careful." Said Schnozzless.

Tarrant winked and smiled at her.

"I'll be back in no time." He laughed and went deeper into the pitch black space that had engulfed his reality.

He expected to find some obstacles along the way, and was ready to jump from one hand of the clock to the other while trying not to fall into the endless pit of blue matter below, as he always did whenever he asked Mirana permission to go and fetch Time for a tea party at Thackery's.
It would also be a good exercise to see if the Outlands had made his body more agile.

He walked and walked.

Eventually, he could hear the swinging of a pendulum and a ticking.

He then saw a small light amidst the darkness. It was the other side of the entrance, completely free from deathly obstacles, except from the swinging pendulum, but that was easy to dodge.

'No wonder the Big Head never had trouble coming to his castle', Tarrant thought. 'I could come here with my eyes closed!'

When he reached the entrance, he found out it was impossible to open.

It was locked.

"Nothing is impossible!" screamed Tarrant, retreating a considerable distance. He bowed his head a little, closed his eyes and charged at the door with all of his speed.

He needed to use his head to open the door, in the most literal of ways.

"Knock, knock!" was Tarrant's battlecry.

He dodged the colossal pendulum, crashed against the door, broke the crystal into tiny pieces... and made the greatest entrance anyone in Time's Castle had ever seen.

"HOLY TEA TRAYS!" He shrieked in pain and covered his forehead with his two hands. He really needed to find a way to remember his bump. "That hurt so much I could cry a sea of tears-"

He stopped his dramatic fit when he saw two small mechanical beings in front of him. Their emerald eyes were fixed on him.

Steam came out from the little valves on their heads.

"Hello there, Seconds!" Greeted Tarrant, forgetting at once about the burning pain spreading across his head. "I haven't seen you in a while. How's everything ticking?"

He tried to reach them, but the Seconds escaped from his grasp and left the room, screaming and ticking in horror.

"Wait! It's me. Tarrant. The Hatter? Come back!" He explained, but the Seconds never came back.

"Was it something I said? Maybe it was the time pun... it's always the time puns."

He meditated about his possible offense as he scratched his chin. Little by little, his mind became too distracted by the overbearing redness of the room.

When he took a better look, Tarrant noticed everything in it resembled the Big Head, from the heart-shaped door and the sickeningly sweet stench of red roses to the pattern of miniscule hearts carved in the walls.

They were millions, and appeared to be handmade.

Out of curiosity, he inspected them. Each heart had a perfect construction, made with great love and art. They also had something written inside.

Tarrant had to squint his eyes to see.
"T & I... Time and Iracebeth." Tarrant read. All the hearts had the same message. "Good thing he is eternal, because I don't see how else he found time to do all this. He has a lot of free of himself."

Something ticked near his feet. Tarrant stopped admiring the walls and looked down.

It was a small Second, the one that resembled an oil can. Unlike the other two Tarrant encountered before, this one acted as friendly as ever.

He picked it up. The Second's ticking sounded like a laugh.

"If it isn't my favorite Second of them all! Say little one, is there a chance you can take me to Time? There's something really important I need to tell him. No, it's not about a tea party, though those are very important matters too..."

"You again? I'm afraid he is not willing to see you today, or tomorrow, or the day after." Said a squeaky and oddly stern voice. It came from the entrance, and belonged to an unique and mustachoied Second.

Tarrant sometimes liked to call him The Second, since he was their leader.

But Tarrant mostly called him by his name.

"Wilkins! For a second, I thought it had been my favorite Second who was speaking, but it was you, The Second, all along!" Tarrant put his favorite Second under his arm and went to greet Wilkins properly. He offered him his hand and showed him the brightest of his smiles. "That may sound confusing, but actually it isn't. Anyway, can you take me to-?"

"No, I can't."

"Uh?"

Wilkins grabbed his hand with more strenght Tarrant knew him capable of, and with his head steaming like a ready kettle, he dragged Tarrant towards the clock he had come out from.

"Wait, what are you doing? Wilkins, this isn't like you."

"No more interlopers... not ever again." Explained Wilkins with only half of his breath. The hatter was too heavy for someone that looked so skinny. "Please sir, just leave and don't come back."

"I can't do that! I must speak with Time. Please." Exclaimed Tarrant, digging his heels into the ground. The Second under his arm was starting to get anxious and twitched its legs in the air, as it he was trying to run away.

"He said he no longer wants to go to your silly tea parties." Wilkins explained with the politeness he had left.

"First of all, how dare you put the words 'silly' and 'tea parties' together in a sentence? There's a law in Underland against it... or there should be, if there isn't!" Tarrant finally lost his patience and began to fight back, but Wilkins was too stubborn and just wouldn't let go of his hand. "Second, I won't believe that until I hear it from himself, so I am going to speak with Time whether you want it or not."

"Sir, just leave." Wilkins pleaded, with his metallic eyebrows coming together in a frown. "Don't
make me tell the Seconds to form the Minutes, or the Hour. I won't ask you again."

Tarrant didn't understand why Wilkins was being so hard-nosed, but he knew he was talking seriously. Tarrant only had to look at the Seconds standing by the entrance, with their eyes red and ready to follow their leader's orders.

"Yeah? Well, don't make me sing a song!" Said Tarrant. It was his last resource.

"What?"

Tarrant took the deepest breath of his life and brought the song to life.

"TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE BAT! HOW I WONDER WHERE YOU'RE AT!"

"Hush, you fool! Seconds, transform into the Minu-" Wilkins however, saw his order interrupted when the oil can Second escaped from Tarrant's arm, fell on his head and shot oil into his mouth.

The rest of the Seconds, now without a leader to give them orders and confused by Tarrant's loud singing, began to cry and run in circles like headless chickens.

"UP ABOVE THE WORLD YOU FLY! LIKE A TEA TRAY IN THE SKY!" Tarrant sung the last word with so much intensity that it transformed into a scream.

"Enough!"

Silence devoured every other sound in an instant. The Seconds, including Tarrant's favorite, went back into their senses and left the room forming a straight line. They moved with precision and swiftly, and were out of sight in the blink of an eye.

The only one that stayed behind was Wilkins, who was still coughing drops of oil.

"No more of that stupid song. I hate it so much! Damn it, I can't sleep for a moment without all of you imbeciles wreking havoc."

A silhouette, the reminiscence of a hourglass, spread across the floor in the form of a imposing shadow.

It was him.

He quickly went from being an ilusory shadow in the halls to his Timelessness presence in the red room.

There was nothing different about Time. He was always the same, and he would ever be.

"What is going on and why are you here? Curtsey while you are thinking what silly excuse to say, it saves me!" Time ordered while ignoring Wilkins, who was trying to explain him about the return of their usual interloper.

At first, Time expression's denoted nothing but annoyance, but when he saw who said interloper truly was, he loosened up a bit.

Just a bit.

"Hatter?"

For Tarrant, that was better than nothing. He decided to do as Time ordered and made a great
reverence before him.

"The one and only, unless you go to my family's shop in Witzend. They are all hatters there! But you already know that, you've seen them yourself." Thinking about his family still saddened him, and he knew Time wasn't fond of digressions, so he cut to the chase. "I-

"No." Time said and turned his back on him. "Leave."

Tarrant's words froze on the tip of his tongue. When he tried to answer back, Time was already gone.

He really passed by quickly.

It wouldn't be true to say Time's attitude didn't extinguish some of Tarrant's enthusiasm.


Tarrant wavered.

Should he?

Then he remembered Alice, and knew he shouldn't

He would remain in Time's castle all of eternity if it was necessary, but he wouldn't leave until he had the chance to speak with Time.

It was his decision.

And like Time himself, there was no turning back.
No sooner had Alice finished reading the letter than she was already at the train station, ready to depart to Pekin.

"An urgent meeting to reconsider my association with the Kingsleigh & Kingsleigh company..."

Alice's objectives for the day were clear: to meet with the Ambassador again, and to sell her family's grandfather clock at a good price while she was in Pekin. There she could find a better price than in any shop at the port.

That had been her mother's idea.

As co-owner of the company, Helen was the first choice to go together with Alice, but she had given her place to James, as a chance for the young first mate to gain more experience and confidence. She also didn't dare to leave Margaret's side just yet.

Alice agreed, and sent word to James to get dressed formally, pack a change of clothes and get ready for his first travel to Pekin.

She also called for Tom and a few others of the crew to her lodging, so they could carry the clock to the station.

Margaret had volunteered to sign any new letters that arrived in Alice's absence, with the permission and guidance of her mother. It would keep her mind off of things, and the help was welcome for Alice.

She, along with Helen, was there to see Alice and James off.

Tom, Harper and some other members of the crew were done making sure the grandfather clock was safely loaded into the cargo wagon, and were now laughing along with James. His uniform was better than new, his hair neatly combed, his boots reflected the sunlight, but also attracted all kinds of teasing remarks from his fellow sailors.

Alice saw them laughing and pushing each other in a friendly manner, with Tom trying to dirty James' boots with his muddy shoes.

She was not free of tormentors either, though hers were far more caring but no less overbearing.

"Remember Alice, if the Ambassador makes you feel uncomfortable again, there's no shame in telling him you're most honest opinion of him and slamming the door in his pretentious face." Helen fixed her daughter's shirt and rubbed her left cheek with her handkerchief.

Alice's outfit was similar in style to the one she had worn in the Ascot's reunion long ago, but this was made of red, green and white silks.

Though it wouldn't have been her first choice if she had been the wearer, Helen had come to appreciate Alice's style.

She knew Charles would have loved it too.

"That's not some very sensible business advice, mother." Alice said, moving her face away from Helen's motherly cares. "Next thing I know, you will advice James to hold the Ambassador while I
"Did you eavesdrop on our conversation?" asked Helen, pretending to be surprised. "That, of course, should be your last resource. Firstly, you should try reaching an agreement; it won't be too pleasant, but sometimes we must endure before we can advance."

Helen put Alice's hair behind her ears and looked at her the same way she did when Alice was just a child.

But her daughter was far from being one anymore.

The sole thought brought Helen happiness and nostalgia alike.

"Look at me, giving you cheeky pieces of advice you don't need." She rested one hand on Alice's head. "You'll know how to proceed, I'm sure of that."

"Oh, that she will. In a quite unorthodox manner as always, I'm sure." Margaret stood next to her mother. She still had much of her strength to regain, but she had enough energy to mock her sister. For Alice, that was a clear sign she was recovering. "Yet, it has worked well for her for many years, so why stop now?"

"Margaret… approving of my methods?" asked Alice, looking at her sister as if she had a bug on her face. "Mother, I believe she is raving because of the fever."

"If I got paid every time I've said the same about you, dear sister..." Replied Margaret.

"Behave, you two." Scolded Helen without meaning it.

The train whistle went off, announcing its departing.

Patiently waiting while forming a line, people began to board it.

It was time for Alice to say goodbye. She hugged her mother and sister and picked up the small suitcase where she had stuffed her change of clothes and some personal items.

James, with a satchel hanging from his shoulder, approached them along with the crew. He bowed his head to Helen and Margaret, and asked them to take care in their absence. When he looked up, he accidentally made eye contact with Margaret, and his ears became red as cherries.

He looked away and stood besides Alice.

His captain's sister muttered something to her mother, making her giggle.

Meanwhile, the crew saluted Alice with the same respect they showed her every time she went ashore.

"Travel well, Captain!" they exclaimed in unison.

"At ease, we'll be back by tomorrow's morning." Said Alice, marching in front of them from one side to the other. "So try not to get too drunk tonight and throw yourselves into the sea to swim after imaginary mermaids. Yes, I'm talking to you, Tom."

The sailors laughed while Tom explained that, real or imagined, his mermaids had been worth the cold he got after.

The line to get on board grew smaller. James and Alice got their tickets ready.
"Take care of each other." Remarked Helen in the last second.

Margaret waved them goodbye.

"We will." Reassured Alice before the wagon's door closed behind her. The last thing she saw was her mother's face.

It didn't matter how many expeditions Alice made, she knew that to her mother, every departure felt the same as the first.

"My lady, is that a tear in your eye?" Asked James, taking something out of his pocket "May I offer you my handkerchief to wipe it off? Seriously though, you can use it if you are really crying…"

Smiling, Alice gave him a light punch in the shoulder. Before she could stop him, James took her suitcase from her hand and helped her carry it. Not seeing the point in arguing about it, she decided to grant him his courtesy just on that occasion.

"It's only two hours of travel, right?" Said James as they searched for their seats in an overcrowded wagon filled with the stench of smoke and the tingling of porcelain cups.

"Why? Are you not fond of train travels, Harcourt?" Asked Alice, finding their seats between a fat man snoring loudly with a newspaper in his hand, and a woman cooling her head with a golden fan.

James accommodated the suitcase and his satchel under the seats before answering. His forehead was beaded with sweat.

"Not really. Back in London, I preferred to travel by carriage; I sometimes walked too, if the time and the distance allowed it. The rail tracks tend to make me a little sick, you see."

"You get sick on trains but not while on the ship?" Asked Alice, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes." Admitted James, shrugging his arms. "What can I say? My stomach works in mysterious ways."

"Considering your work, it's pretty convenient. Imagine if you were an engine driver."

"I try not to."

The train started moving. The sleeping man behind them grunted and almost woke up, but he instead rambled something in his sleep and remained lost in his dreams.

His snoring was almost louder than the train's engine. The rest of the passengers were no less noisy. It didn't take long before babies began to cry.

Alice looked at James with the corner of her eye. He was sitting stiffly, pale as wax.

"Are you alright?"

James swallowed and nodded with a smile.

Back in London, Alice knew all of his travels on train must have been in first class, free of the uproar of the multitude and with a cup of tea served to him every hour.

Sick as they had made him feel, those travels were true luxuries compared to his current situation.

All of his old life was.
James's stomach grumbled.

"But… I didn't have breakfast." Stuttered James.

"Thank goodness you are sitting next to the window." Said Alice, patting him gently in the back. "But we better not let it come to that. Is there something that can make you feel better?"

"Reading."

"Reading makes you feel better when you are dizzy?"

"Yes."

"Your metabolism is topsy-turvy indeed."

Alice had brought no books to distract herself during the travel. The Ambassador's sudden invitation had left little time to worry about matters of the sort.

An idea came to Alice's mind. She turned around on her seat and, after making sure the man was still deeply asleep, she took the newspaper from his hands.

"That wasn't very moral." Said James, accepting the newspaper and unfolding it. "But morality will not put my stomach to rest, so thank you kindly."

"You are welcome. And we'll give it back, don't worry." Assured Alice.

"Hey, there's no need to act all holier than me."

James' face regained color as he skimmed through the pages. Alice knew the news didn't make much sense to him in Chinese, but it was a good practice to hone his reading skill.

She was about to suggest him to read it out loud so he could practice his speaking too, but James hold her by the arm and stared blankly at the newspaper.

"Alice…" he said with a faint thread of voice.

"Oh no," she muttered. "To the window, James! Aim to the window!"

"It's not about that!" Exclaimed James, a little embarrassed by the attention Alice had drawn upon him. He handed the newspaper to Alice and pointed at the image of a well dressed man standing in front of a manor.

Alice knew him.

She had visited that manor ever since childhood.

She read the headline out loud in Chinese. James understood a part of it, but he had to ask for a translation.

"Ascot Company out of business: Hamish Ascot suspected of illegal trading."

It felt strange, pronouncing those words. She felt no interest in reading the rest of the article.

"It's over." Alice said with her mouth dry. "Hamish's company…"

From then on, Lord Ascot's company would be nothing more than a thing of the past, a subject of
trivial conversation for future generations of merchants.

"It was inevitable in retrospect." Stated James coldly, wishing to know the details of the news, but lacking the heart to hurry Alice up. "No matter how prosperous a company is, if it's led by incompetent hands, its days are counted. I saw many lords inheriting their companies to their children, always out of sentiment or tradition rather than good judgment. They all fell in the end."

Alice put the newspaper on the seat and stared out the window.

James didn't pick it up, and wondered if he had spoken too much like the lawyer he had once been.

The news stung Alice no less than they should, but a lot more than she would have expected.

Her new company and the Kingsleigh & Kingsleigh carried on her father's true spirit, but a part of his essence, of the man he had been, would always be linked with the Ascots and their company.

To see the work of Lord Ascot's lifetime come to such an end felt almost unnatural to Alice, and it was mostly undeserved. He had always been nice to her. She would never resent the father for the actions of his son.

"It's strange." Finally said Alice after a long pause. "Ever since my mother and I started our company, I thought that seeing Hamish out business would feel like a victory. I thought it would be the ultimate payback for all the pain he put us through. But now, I feel nothing of the sort, and what I do feel doesn't make me happy at all."

"Alice, you don't have to feel bad for Hamish. He brought it upon himself."

"But his father deserved better."

James' sympathy bloomed at the mention of his former boss, his true boss. Not for Hamish, but for the legacy he had destroyed.

Alice was right: the Ascot's fall brought no comfort at all.

"There's nothing we can do for the company now, but we can remember Lord Ascot with the respect he deserves." James stated.

"He gave me my first chance to set sail. He thought I was as crazy as my father, but he never doubted me." Alice smiled and scratched her eye, hoping James wouldn't see the tear and offer her his handkerchief.

James didn't notice. He was too distracted in his own memories.

"The time I worked for him was short, but it was also one the best parts of my life in London. I mourned him, but I never talked with anyone about his death until now."

"Why not?" asked Alice.

"I didn't have anyone to talk to." Said James, looking down.

"I was the same."

James said nothing and kept looking at his boots. Alice wondered if the wound was still too fresh for him to speak freely about it.

"James, do you miss your life in London?"
It wasn't the most trivial subject to cheer up the mood, but the question had lingered too long on Alice's mind to keep quiet about it anymore.

James' eyes slowly met with Alice's. Alice knew by his expression that he hadn't given much thought to the matter at all, so she gave him more time think by elaborating her question a bit more.

"You left it all behind and entered very different life. It's almost as if…"

"As if I was running away?" Inquired James neutrally.

"I didn't mean …" Alice bit her tongue, regretting her poor choice of words.

James spoke with his usual friendliness.

"Let's see, I had a decent apartment, three warm meals every day, a stable routine, and my pay was nothing to be ashamed of. I dare to say most lawyers my age don't see that kind of payment until they enter their forties."

James used his fingers to count the things that were once his life. "And don't forget the comfortable train travels. I always had my own cabinet and a bucket for my sickness. I would be lying if I said I don't miss those things every once in a while."

If he was trying to make it all sound like a joke, then he was failing miserably. Alice thought of telling him that if he missed it that much, he could go back to it whenever he felt like it.

"But there's one thing I don't miss at all. It's one of the two things that keep me from ever going back."

"What is it?" Asked Alice, not sure if to feel offended or interested.

"The man that I was." James' shame made it impossible for him to continue looking at Alice. "The man I had become even before I started working with Lord Ascot. Maybe I'm running away from him."

Alice couldn't believe in what James was saying at first. How bad of a man could someone like him ever have been? That was if he had ever been bad at all. James had a tendency to exaggerate his mistakes and faults, after all.

"You are being too hard on yourself, as usual."

"No, I'm not." Reassured James firmly. "The things I did, always objecting it was in the name of my profession, always seeing people as nothing more than names and signatures in a contract. Always ready to obey and counsel corrupt lords, always ignoring the unfairness of a deal as long as I got my pay at the end of the day."

"James."

"You saw it yourself, when you went to the Ascot Manor after your return from China." Alice couldn't see it, but his eyes were shinning. "He humiliated you and threatened to take the Wonder away. I could have intervened; I could have pointed out a flaw on his procedure, an error on his logic. I could have at least spoken against his childish idiocy. But what did I do? Nothing, I just watched."

Alice wavered. She remembered James standing behind her. At that time, she had never expected him to speak in her favor, but now that she knew he'd had the intention but had lacked the courage,
Alice understood the source of his guilt a lot better.

Gently, she put a hand on his shoulder.

"That's in the past. You are a different person now."

"Am I?"

"You wouldn't be here with me otherwise."

"Alice." He thought of holding her hand, but he held back. There was something he had to do first.

"I need to tell you- "

His stomach grumbled. Thankfully for both of them and the rest of the passengers nearby, it was out of hunger.

"You're stomach is more eloquent than you, James." Joked Alice as she took her suitcase from under the seats and opened it. "Let's see, I think I packed a box with biscuits somewhere."

But what Alice found instead was more bound to make James sneeze rather than killing his hunger.

Peacefully asleep on top her change of clothes, which were already covered with shedding, was her nameless kitten.

Only that she was no longer so nameless anymore.

"Dinah!" Exclaimed Alice, holding the cat in her hands.

"Who?"

"The kitten."

"You brought it?" James asked, a little puzzled and keeping his face a far as he could from the animal.

"Yes, you never know when a cat may come in handy."

"I can think of a couple of scenarios where a cat doesn't fit at all, Alice."

"It was a joke, James."

"All right, but I still don't understand how you pack a cat without noticing it."

"I was really stressed out. She must have sneaked in when I wasn't looking. You can blame this on the Ambassador and his urgent message."

Dinah moved her paw towards Alice and gnawed at her finger with her tiny fangs. Her playfulness didn't allow James or Alice to be angry at her for much time, and soon she was sleeping again on Alice's lap.

"So... Dinah?" Asked James after blowing his nose.

"I used to have a cat with the same name when I was a child. She was a great pet, and my best friend." Alice explained.

"It's a good name, much better than Mao." Agreed James, petting the kitten quickly with only one
finger. "Since you have told me her name, I guess this means it's time for me to fulfill my part of the deal."

"What are you saying, Harcourt?"

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" Said James, closing his eyes and concentrating.

Alice, with all the chaos that had happened in the morning, had put the whole matter about the riddle deep below her list of priorities. It surprised her that James remembered it at all. Most people she had told the riddle to found the whole thing so nonsensical that they saw no point in musing about it for more than a minute.

"It took me most of the night, but I think I figured it out." James talked with the impetus of a child. "My first conclusion was that Poe had written on both of them. What's more, the poem and the riddle have something in common: they both keep me up at night."

Alice listened with attention. James became a bit intimidated, so he continued before he lost his courage.

"But then I thought of a simpler answer, that both have inky quills."

Alice giggled. She seemed amused.

James became inspired and carried on.

"I was happy with it, but then I thought: am I being too simple? So there you have me, with my head on the pillow, trying to find a more detailed answer, and I got to this: Because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and it is never put with the wrong end in front. So very refined of me, but then it hit me immediately after: Now I was being too elaborated."

"So you rejected both?" Asked Alice.

"Indeed. But in doing so, I figured out the answer." Explained James with solemnity. "By then, I had spent hours trying to find an answer, pouring the same amount of thought on it as if it was a scientific matter, and that precisely had been my mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I was searching too seriously for something that maybe required not much logic at all." James explained. "The riddle makes no sense, so I can't find a correct answer for it, or a wrong one. And by having no possible answer, then that was the answer all along! So here's my answer: there's no answer!"

James raised his arms to add impact to his not-answer.

He was breathless and filled with pride about his conclusion, though he had to admit it sounded much better in his imagination than in his mouth. That's what happened when there was too much repetition in a sentence, but he hoped the cacophony hadn't killed his answer.

Alice stared at him, and James couldn't tell if she was surprised or if she was mocking him.

"Or maybe I don't have enough wit to figure it out and I'm just trying to defend my argument at all costs, which wouldn't be surprising at all… Curse these lawyer habits of mine." Alice laughed, making Dinah's ears twitch. The man sleeping behind them giggled quickly in his
"You actually thought about it!" Alice barely had any air left to speak.

"That... that was the point, wasn't it?" James scratched the back of his head. "Did I do it wrong... that isn't what I was supposed to do? I missed the point of it all, didn't I?"

"No, James." Alice put a hand on his arm. "You did it right! I'm not laughing at you, it's just that you are the second person who tried to find an answer without thinking it was a waste of time, and... that makes me happy. Thank you."

"I should thank you too." Said James.

"What for?"

"For sharing it with me. The riddle took hours away of my night, but it was time well spent."

"Smooth talker."

"That's the other reason I don't want to go back to London." James continued, without minding Alice's teasing. "Even when we are on the ship just charting constellations, or walking around the market without any money to buy anything, or here on the train solving senseless riddles... We could be doing anything, but I never feel like I'm wasting my time when I'm with you. I hope you feel the same."

James' heart was beating so hard he feared Alice could hear it. He played with his thumbs with desperation, digging his nail so hard on a knuckle it started to bleed.

Maybe he had spoken too much.

If he transformed that whole moment into awkwardness, he wouldn't forgive himself.

Alice held his injured hand and caressed away a drop of blood.

"James." She whispered, with her eyes fixed on the wound. Her sad tone took him by surprise. "Tarrant."

The train's breaks shrieked and penetrated deep into their ears. The sudden stop caused most of the passengers to hit their heads against the window and fall to the floor. Suitcases and purses gathered in front of the wagon and crashed against the wall like cannonballs.

The few passengers that managed to stay on their seats, like Alice and James, were too shocked to think clearly for a few seconds.

The only ones who couldn't care less about the chaos were Dinah and the Sleeping man, both lost in their sleep like drunkards after a celebration.

"Are you all right?" James asked Alice.

"If I survived dozens of pirate attacks, I think I'll get out of this one just fine." Said Alice, closing her eyes and rubbing the back of her neck.

"True enough." Said James, knowing the hit on his forehead would hurt a lot more in the morning.

One of the train's workers entered the wagon and informed them that, due to mechanical inconveniences, the train wouldn't move for an hour or more. The passengers hissed at him, throwing
insults and questions at him without mercy. 

The worker asked them to be patient, and insisted that the engine driver was already trying to fix the malfunctions. He then ran away, before the passengers desired to lynch him.

Alice kept her composure, but she found it hard not to share the same annoyance than the rest of the passengers.

Everything was going well, and now that had to happen.

"Great, just what I needed." She grunted, stomping her feet on the ground. "Remind me to buy myself a good luck charm once we get to Pekin, I could certainly use one right now."

"Don't worry, I'm sure the Ambassador will understand if we are late." Said James.

"You sweet, innocent child."

"So much for my optimism, then."

"You'll understand once you met him. Business matters transforms the nicest of people into hungry sharks."

"Hey, you are talking to an ex-lawyer, remember?"

"I can't argue with that."

They waited ten minutes, but the train didn't move.

Then an hour passed, but nothing changed.

"This is going to take a while. A lot more than the engine driver may wish to admit." Alice said, with her back against the seat.

James was blowing air to his head with the newspaper, and had at one moment joked with Alice about borrowing the fan from the lady in front of them, who had fallen asleep due to the strong heat.

"As long as it doesn't take until midnight." Complained James.

"Well, if it does come to that, maybe we should find a way to pass the time." Suggested Alice.

"You are right. Did you bring a pack of cards? I could use some practice. Tom and Harper keep winning my money every time we play."

"Do you want to hear my story?" Alice asked.

The newspaper slipped from James' hand. He thought he had misheard.

Alice asked again, and knew he hadn't. Being stuck in a hot train together with angry strangers wasn't the situation he would have preferred for that moment, but…

"Are you sure?"

"I think I am." Said Alice, feeling some doubt within, but still willing to give it a chance.

"This story is very special to you, isn't it?" Said James, trying to find the words. "Are you sure you want to entrust it to me?"
"Of course, James." Alice grabbed his hand. "We are friends, right?"

James nodded, but didn't answer.

"Alice, I will gladly listen to your story." James' tone became serious, almost repentant. He squeezed her hand a bit. "But I need you to tell you mine first. Only then you will decide what happens next, or if you ever want to talk to me ever again."

Alice couldn't understand what James was saying, but she comprehended it caused him much pain. It also made her uneasy.

James implied that what he was about to tell her could create a rift between them, one too big to ever cross.

She didn't want that. Not at all.

With an anxious heart, she took the risk and let James tell her what he had kept silent for so long.

"It's a story…” Started James, struggling to find the courage to pronounce every word. "…about a man, a lawyer. But above all, it's about a man who saw much, talked much, but always did nothing. And people paid the price of his indifference, and the price was steep."
Dark and boring.

If Tarrant had to describe Time's castle to a curious stranger, those would be his first choice of words. It was an enormous place, much bigger than any other castle in Underland.

One that, at first, he thought would hold many strange mysteries to explore and secrets to discover.

But as days passed, he realized it was mostly an empty castle of monotony. Beside the eternally moving gears and the always worried Seconds giving them maintenance, not much happened around there.

The Seconds surely worked hard.

Did they ever go to sleep?

And if they did, did Time had to kiss them all goodnight, as if they were his children?

And if that was the case, would that make him Father Time?

Oh well.

As he was saying, the most interesting thing about the place had to be that infamous Chronosphere.

And yes, it was a curious artifact, and it looked pretty, with its golden color and strange mechanics.

A very complex machine indeed.

Best of all, if Tarrant's memory didn't fail him, it did a toilet sound every time some pulled the chain to start it up.

Why was that?

Had the Chronosphere, at one point, served another purpose?

That was disgusting, but funny.

So yes, the Chronosphere was a curious thing.

But it lost much of its appeal if someone….

"Stubborn clown, shut up already! Your nonsensical blabbering is driving me insane!" Time stopped walking and looked over his shoulder. "And how many times must tell you to stop tailing me while I'm at work? Or at least be quiet while you do. You aren't being very stealthy if you are breathing all those stupid questions on my neck."
This came as a surprise to Tarrant.

He hadn't realized Time knew he was behind him, or that he was so close to him.

Spacial awareness worked in funny ways in that castle.

But that didn't matter.

He had Time's attention at last!

He'd better be careful not to offend him.

"I'm sorry, your Timelessness. Sometimes, the filter between what I think and what I say gets a little confused when I'm nervous. Your hat is out fashioned …see?"

Time gasped and touched his hat. That wasn't true, he was just mocking him.

"What can you possibly know about hats? You are a Hatter." He asked, closing his eyes with an air of superiority.

"I think you just answered your own question." Smiled Tarrant.

Time tried to argue back, but much to his anger, he had to grant the victory to the Hatter.

That fool was more intelligent than he looked.

Damn him.

Tarrant tried to lessen Time's humiliation and patted him strongly in the back.

"Don't worry about that, my friend. I can make you a new one if you wish. One covered with gears, hourglasses, watches, all that stuff you like."

"You know what I really wish for?" Inquired Time with a much gentler tone. "Here, I'll whisper it to you. It's a secret."

Tarrant's curiosity sparked.

Time was going to share a secret with him.

That was a good sign.

After days of chasing after Time as he ran away from him, after getting lost in the endless corridors for hours until a Second guided him back, and after almost getting stuck in the gears more than once, Tarrant finally had the chance to talk with him.

With happiness, Tarrant put a hand behind his ear.

Time leaned closer to him, grinning.

"What I want..." Time's voice went from a hushed whisper to a thunderous shout that almost made Tarrant's head explode. "IS FOR YOU TO LEAVE ME ALONE! AND STOP STEPPING ON MY CAPE!"

Time pulled his cape away from under Tarrant's feet. The Hatter lost his balance and fell to the floor on his back. Time wasted none of himself and took the chance to escape.
"Wait! Your Timelessness." Said Tarrant, trying to get up, but his brain and ears were still too shaky for him to run after Time.

"It's your Timeliness, you fool." Screamed Time without stopping. "Timeliness!"

Time eventually disappeared in the immensity of the castle.

Once Tarrant managed to pull himself together, Time was nowhere to be seen.

He had lost him again.

"No, this has gone long enough." Said Tarrant. That was the closer he had gotten to talk with Time and he was not going to let that chance amount to nothing. "Tarrant Hightopp will not waste more of his time with Time!"

Screaming as if he was charging into a battle, Tarrant ran in the same direction Time had taken. He climbed up hundreds of stairs, ran across dozens of corridors and jumped from pendulum to pendulum for hours.

He found nothing.

He was lost again in the tricky endlness of the castle, with only the creaking of the gears and the whistling of solitude to join him.

"Time, I just want to talk with you." He screamed, hoping Time would be nearby. "Please, just listen to me."

Only the echoes of his voice answered him.

Frustrated and tired, he fell on his knees.

"Shukm!" Tarrant punched the floor, and felt how the negative emotions that had been festering inside him began to overflow inside his body.

It all came back to him like a giant wave: his fruitless expeditions in the castle of dreams, the pink celebration of the queens, his father kneeling before the Bloody Big Head, his family cowering in fear, his father crying, Alice's departure.

He pressed his head with his hands, and felt more lost in that abyss of resentment than in Time's castle.

A faint ticking dispersed his rage. Tarrant came back to his senses in the same manner he woke up from a nightmare.

Standing next to him was his Favorite Second, rubbing against his leg and ticking in a sad manner. Though its eyes were emotionless, Tarrant knew the little fellow was worried, and could only imagine the dreadful expression he had on his face.

Not without effort, Tarrant let go of his anger and recovered his usual temper.

The Seconds, Tarrant had noticed, were very sensitive in spite of their metallic nature.

"Hello, little one." Tarrant gently picked it up. It kept ticking with sadness. "Why the long face? Did you have a bad day? Don't tell me Wilkins scolded you again. Well, if it brings any comfort, know that my day wasn't any good either."
The second ticked again.

His conversations with his Favorite Second left much to be desired, but it was always a welcome and loyal companion. It sometimes reminded Tarrant of Mallymkum, and together with the memory of the dormouse came the memories of all the people dear to him.

The castle's silence allowed old memories to flow like a river, be them good or bad.

And when they were good, Tarrant didn't mind being lost in the everlasting corridors.

Sometimes, when he spent hours wandering alone before a Second came to his rescue, the idea of going back home grew deeper roots inside his mind.

He feared he wouldn't be able to rip it off one day, and that it would end up replacing the plan he had come to treasure with the same intensity he missed Alice.

"Tick." His Favorite Second escaped from his hands and moved as if it was a dog waging its tail.

It jumped a couple of times and ran off towards a corridor with a tiny entrance.

"Wait for me!" Tarrant had to run with all his speed to keep up with the Second.

It led him through corridors he hadn't explored before; many of them were so small he had to crouch and crawl to get through them.

"I could use some pishsalver right now." Tarrant grunted as his hips got stuck at the entrance of a corridor. He tried escape, but it was in vain. "Maybe I should have eaten all those red creepers."

He felt a cold liquid streaming down his back. His Favorite Second had come to his rescue. Once it felt it had poured enough oil on the Hatter, the Second jumped on Tarrant's hat and ran off again.

Tarrant managed to slide free, but now he looked as if he had sat on a giant ink jar.

In any case, he was free again.

The chase continued through Time's him-shaped corridors and near the entrances of the Living and Deceased Underlandians Chambers. Tarrant had seen those rooms before, but he dared not enter either.

He had no desire in knowing his lifespan or those of his friends, nor he had interest in visiting the dead.

Not to mention Time had taken special measures to keep him out, and had ordered two Minutes to guard each entrance.

Tarrant doffed his hat as he passed in front of the brutish guardians.

The minutes growled, but didn't mind him otherwise. Still, Tarrant wished his Favorite Second wouldn't make him get so close to them.

The Minutes had never attacked him, but he doubted they would hesitate to do so if he got too near.

The next destination was the Grand Clock. Tarrant had visited it only once, and he had no intention to get close to it again.

The Seconds were nice, the Minutes were grumpy, but the Hour guarding the Grand Clock and the
access to the Chronosphere was nothing like the rest of its kin.

Its savage temper sent shivers down Tarrant's spine.

The Hour did nothing to its fellow Second when it passed running in front of it, but it became feral at the sole sight of Tarrant.

The hatter had to dodge a colossal metallic hand from squishing him like a bug.

"If you don't like me, you can just tell me. " Said Tarrant, looking back as he continued to run away from the gigantic entity. "There's no reason to get so defensive."

Then again, it wasn't long ago since all Underland almost rusted away into oblivion because the Chronosphere had been removed.

Under that perspective, Tarrant had to admit that all the new cautions Time was taking weren't all that unreasonable after all.

Tarrant was so immersed in his thoughts he didn't see when the Second stopped. He tripped over him and his face landed flat on the floor.

It hurt him a bit, but Tarrant was more concerned about calming down the scared Second, who ticked as if it was crying for having hurt its friend.

"There, there, it was just an accident. No need to get sad about it." Tarrant gave a small kiss to the Second, and it immediately became happy again. "But next time, how about you slow down a little? And the farther you take me from the Hour, the better. I don't want to tick my last tock just yet."

Tarrant put the Second down and looked around. He was in an narrow corridor he had never explored before. It was warmer than the rest of the castle.

At the end, there was a wooden door. It was half-opened.

Tarrant could hear voices coming out of it.

The Second pushed his leg forward and made him take a step closer to the room.

It was the first time a Second led him there. The rest of the occasions, they simple took him to the castle's entrance or back to the grandfather clock in red heart-shaped room, hoping he would take the hint and leave.

But Tarrant had decided not to return to Underland until he had spoken to Time, and the Seconds wouldn't make him change his mind.

"I shouldn't be here, should I?" Tarrant said to the Second. "You are a rebellious one. I knew you were my favorite for a reason."

The Second jumped to his arms.

"Well, it's now or never." Said Tarrant, bracing himself and walking towards the entrance of the room.

Time wouldn't escape him now.

The closer he got to the door, the warmer the corridor got. Soon Tarrant could smell the scent of burning lodges and cinder.
It had been quite a while since he had last felt the soothing heat of a chimney's fire.

"He just won't go away."

Tarrant would recognize that accent and voice anywhere. More than angry, Time sounded tired.

"He will desist eventually, sir; don't worry. And if he doesn't, we can have the Hour to throw him out for good."

Tarrant held his breath and rested an ear against the door. The Second is his arms ticked once, but he hushed it before it could do it again.

"I don't understand. Why does he insist in staying here?"

"For the same reason every other interloper has ever dared to enter the castle and interrupt your duties, sir: for his own selfish reasons."

"Truer words have never been spoken, Wilkins." Agreed Time. He was working in a new trinket, judging by the tingling of cogs and screws. "I am the keeper of life and reality as they know it! I thought that would make them understand I cannot waste none of myself with their petty, insignificant problems. And especially not in idiotic tea parties full of loons."

"Indeed, sir."

So it was true, after all.

Time had never enjoyed the tea parties.

Inviting him in the first place was originally Tarrant's idea.

Tarrant did it as a way to make amends for treating Time with so little respect in their first meeting. It was a formality, one Mirana had permitted simply because Tarrant was her friend and savior.

She also agreed to no longer keep the clock that gave access to Time's castle all chained up, as a symbol of her good faith.

Nevertheless, the White Queen had some fears about allowing Time to wander around free in Underland, so she established some conditions for his visits:

First, Time could only access Underland if Tarrant came looking for him.

Second, the hatter was only allowed to do so when Mirana granted him her sporadic permission to access Time's castle.

Third, Time was not to interact with any other person in Underland other than Tarrant, his family and the hatter's usual group of friends.

Fourth, Time's visits had to be brief and supervised, with at least one of Mirana's royal knights keeping an eye on him at all moment.

And last but not least, Time and Iracebeth were forbidden from seeing or talking to each other under any circumstance. As an extra precaution, they couldn't be in the same place at once.

If any of these conditions was overlooked, then Time's free access to present Underland would be history.
The whole process had been manufactured at first, as if they were all representing a farce to establish what little cordiality could ever exist between Time and the Underlandians.

But as the tea parties went by, Tarrant had come to consider Time a friend. Not the kindest or the most patient, but a friend nonetheless.

And yet, it all had been a joke for Time after all. Tarrant saw no other explanation for his indifference and disdain.

He couldn't deny he felt embittered by Time's cold words and ingratitude. He had thought Time would come to appreciate their company eventually, as annoying as he found it at first.

Or didn't he ever feel lonely living in the middle of a barren wasteland inside a forgotten dark castle?

"They are all a waste of me." Stated Time.

No, apparently he didn't, thought Tarrant as he clenched his jaw.

"Indeed, sir."

"No matter what they do, it all amounts to nothing in the end."

"It's not in their nature to do otherwise, sir."

"They have so little of me to live, and what do they do with it? They waste it away in meaningless matters and idle activities that gain them nothing."

"That's their fate, sir." Wilkin's voice was so mellow it appeased Tarrant too. "It's the way it always was and always will be."

"And still, they…"

Tarrant stopped hearing the sound of metallic parts being handled. He heard the low jingling of a chain as it swung between Time's fingers.

"Sir?"

"They want to waste it with me." Time's voice was little more than a whisper. "Without asking nothing in return."

Steam blew out from Wilkin's head like a boiling kettle

"It's just a matter of time before they do, sir."

"But."

"When has it been any different? You should know better by now, sir."

Time knocked the chair down when he stood up. Tarrant had to hug his Favorite Second to stop it from running away in fear.

He dared to take a peep inside the room.

He saw Wilkins and Time facing each other, with the chimney's fire reflecting its orange light on their metallic joints. Something shun with greater intensity on Time's hand.
Tarrant thought it was the Chronosphere, and hoped Time would return it to its place before the rust overtook reality again.

"How dare you talk to me like that?" Time spoke with the same authority of the superior entity he was supposed to represent. "You are out of line, Wilkins."

Wilkins, if scared, was brave enough to keep himself from cowering. He stood still as a statue.

"It is affecting your judgment, sir." The leader of the Seconds took a step towards his boss. He spoke without emotion. "Dispose of it."

Time said nothing and moved his hand away from Wilkins.

"What?" He asked, impressed by the gall of his butler.

"It doesn't belong here."

"That's not up to you to decide."

"But you know I'm right, don't you sir?"

Time lost some of his confidence. He looked at the thing he was holding and covered it gently with his other hand.

Tarrant didn't know Time could hesitate too.

Wilkins sighed with sympathy.

"Let me do it for you." He offered. "It's the right thing to do. You know I'm right, sir."

The Second in Tarrant's arms was now in a ticking frenzy. He begged it to keep quiet, but it wasn't working.

Wilkins looked in their direction.

Tarrant barely managed to hide behind the door, but he didn't know if The Second had seen them.

Wilkins took a step forward to the door.

Tarrant had no place to run. If he fled, the only way available would lead him right into the Hour's hands.

"Who's there?"

Tarrant's tongue was stuck to his palate. He knew he had seen and heard too much for Wilkins to leave him walk away freely this time.

He thought of answering 'Nobody', but he doubted Wilkins would fall for that.

"Tick."

Before he knew it, he was blinded by a shot of oil.

He screamed and rubbed his eyes, and too late he realized what he had done.

"Favorite Second." he muttered, with his eyelids still closed.
All he could do as he tried to clean his eyes with his sleeves was to listen to the scandal his Favorite Second was causing inside Time's chamber.

Tarrant could hear Wilkins ordering it to stop as it knocked clocks and other of Time's souvenirs off the walls and counters.

One of the clocks fell on Time's head and then hit him in the face with a cuckoo. Perhaps if he had been wearing his hat, it wouldn't have been so painful, but alas, he hadn't taken Tarrant's hattery criticism lightly.

Meanwhile, Wilkins chased after the Second, and they left a trace of chaos along their way.

Chess pieces were soon scattered all over the floor, along with Time's tools and spare pieces. Ceramic figures broke into thousands of pieces as they touched the ground, while books fell from the shelves and had some of their pages ripped apart.

"Stop at once!" Wilkins threw himself to catch the Second, but it ducked and turned around in the opposite direction, making Wilkins crash against Time's wardrobe instead. "Uh-oh"

The door submitted to the impact and opened, letting free the many curiosities Time had collected throughout Underland's story, with a Dodo, a tove and a borogove among them.

The Favorite Second approached Time and snatched something from his hand.

"Stop, you thief!" Tarrant heard Time scream.

His sight was blurry but it was better than being in total darkness. He barely had any time to recover when something bumped against his chest.

It was the Second, with something shinny hanging from its pourer.

Tarrant took it.

To his relief, it wasn't the Chronosphere.

It was a pocket watch.

There was something written on the cover.

"Cha—Kin. What a good name." That was all he was able to read before a hand on his shoulder forced him inside the room.

He needn't see clearly to know who was the man standing in front of him. Time glared at him with so much rage Tarrant was surprised his eyes didn't turn from blue to red.

The Second trembled in Tarrant's arm. Wilkins looked at it with equal contempt as he tried to put the Dodo back inside the wardrobe. It was bitting one of his metal eyebrows.

"You ungrateful worm." Hissed Time to Tarrant. "I let you into my castle, allow you to wander around for days, send you a Second every time you got lost … and how do you pay me? You turn them against me."

Wilkins saw from the distance. He didn't intervene.

"Was this your plan all along? You wanted to steal my gift to sell it back in Witzend, didn't you? From hatter to robber, just like that!"
In other occasion, Tarrant would have found Time's crazy imagination hilarious, but it was hard to have a sense of humor when the person in front of you had the power to age you back into non-existence.

Or leave you forever frozen in a tea party, again.

"And you." Time snatched the Second from Tarrant's arm. It was too scared to explain or do anything else than ticking and crying. "How dare you betray me? Of all my Seconds, I'd never thought it would be you!

Now Time sounded as if he was about to cry.

Wilkins rolled his eyes, but was happy to see his master behave as he should.

Sort of.

His smiled diminished when Tarrant meddled once again.

"I am no 'Evil Master of Seconds' and this little fellow is not a traitor, your Timeliness." Tarrant spoke as if he would to a friend in a party. "It's my opinion he simply brought this watch to me so I could repair it. Busy as you are, I'm sure the Second just wanted to free you from this chore so you could focus on more important duties. It is a thoughtful Second, it really is."

Time looked at Tarrant, and then to the Second, and then to Tarrant again.

The back of his head was starting to overheat.

"And it is right! I can make this watch tick tock again in the blink of an eye. I may be a hatter, but my skills as a clock repairer are not too shabby. See it as my way to repay you for letting me stay in your castle all this time." Tarrant went to the desk where Time created and repaired his trinkets and slammed the pocket watch on the surface.

The cover opened as swiftly as a catapult.

Time gave out a little scream and put his hands on his head.

Free at last, the Second tried to escape, but Wilkins seized it before it could reach the door.

"Now, let us see…" Tarrant said, scratching his chin and taking a closer look. "Ah! Yes, this clock is several days late. A serious malfunction better known as the 'Mad Watch Disease', but don't panic, I have the perfect solution."

Time was pulling his hair.

Wilkins just watched.

"It is a cure that's been passed down among the members Hightopp's clan for generations!" Continued Tarrant, raising a finger. "I will need some butter, tea, jam, sugar, two spoons, not mustard because this is not a sandwich, and lemon of course. Guaranteed to make it work again! And if it doesn't… I don't suppose you have a big hammer somewhere inside that wardrobe, do you? That's the only way to stop an incurable Mad Watch."

"Let me get them for you, sir." Offered Wilkins in a good mood.

"Why, thank you Wilkins."
Time punched the wall and a wave of blue energy spread across the room. Everything slowed down for a second, and for Tarrant the sensation was too familiar for him not to become scared.

Wilkins didn't put on brave attitude this occasion and he backed down in terror once the flow of time went back to normal. The Favortie Second clung to its leader's coat and both retreated back into a corner.

"Enough!" Ordered Time.

With just two giant steps, he made his way to the desk and picked up the watch. He guarded it in his hands, keeping it away from Tarrant as if he was an enemy of clocks.

"This is my gift. I will not let you destroy it." Said Time, with a very overprotective and menacing attitude.

"Destroy it? No, I'm just trying to fix it for you." Tarrant wondered why he had given that impression, but realized that didn't matter. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mistreat it."

But it was too late.

Time had taken offense, and now he had to pay.

Or at least listen to his ranting.

Either way, it wouldn't be pretty.

"What, do you think I don't treasure it just because it is a gift from the kindergartener? I never think ill of a gift, no matter its origins." Continued Time, talking faster than Thackery after having too much sugar in his tea. "Am I right, Wilkins?"

"Well sir, considering this is the first gift you've ever gotten, it's hard for me to make an average of your reactions to them."

"Such impudence, and honesty." Time became a little sad, but he recovered instantly and continued to talk about things Tarrant didn't begin to understand.

The only thing constant about Time's rambling was the much referenced kindergartener.

"Is that Cha-Kin's nickname?" Asked Tarrant, folding his arms.

"Who?" Time asked, not knowing what the hatter was babbling all about.

"The owner of that watch. That's his name."

Time look at the watch's cover and laughed.

"It says Charles Kingsleigh, you fool." Answered Time, finding great amusement in mocking Tarrant's pronunciation. "How do you even misread it?"

"With oil." Answered Tarrant naturally.

Little by little, the name started to resound in Tarrant's memory, and then it all came to him.

She had only told him her last name once, the first time they met when she was a girl.

He had never thought about it since then.
For him, she was and would always be Alice.

The rest of her name mattered little.

"Did she give it to you?" Tarrant was in awe. She had left something behind.

That was enough to give him hope.

Time stopped talking.

"That's what I've been saying, hatter! Put attention."

"Let me see it."

Tarrant reached his hand for the watch without waiting for an answer.

Time pushed him away and stretched his arm as far as he could.

"No, it's mine."

"Just a quick look."

"What part of No is so hard for you mortals to understand? It's one syllable, two letters, a simple word, one with the same meaning in more than four languages."

"Let me see it."

"No."

It was so close and so far, just like Alice.

Tarrant needed to hold it in his hands once more.

If he could, then his dream of seeing Alice again wouldn't seem so unreachable anymore.

But Time didn't give in.

Tarrant desisted against his will.

At first he felt angry at Time, but after some thought, he concluded he couldn't blame him for being so protective over the only gift he had ever received.

If he was in his place, and if that gift had once belonged to Alice, Tarrant wouldn't be more sharing than Time.

"As you wish." Accepted Tarrant, managing to keep calm. "But promise me to take care of it always. I get the feeling it meant a lot to her."

Time blinked, and his expression mellowed.

"It did." He smiled and gently put it inside his pocket. "I will."

The Favorite Second ticked, and Wilkins frowned.

"Thank you." Tarrant, though upset about the watch's departure, found comfort in knowing it couldn't have a better keeper than Time himself.
It would be on good hands for all eternity.

He wondered if Alice had seen it that way too.

He wished he could know.

"I can… and I will!"

That was the perfect moment.

The time had come, Tarrant thought, to talk of important things.

He had ink in his eyes and on his back, and he hadn't eaten for days, even less slept.

The chamber was a mess of feathers, spare pieces and broken clocks.

Wilkins was harshly scolding the Second, who looked down in shame.

Time had a melancholic face that no doubt matched his mood.

Unfavorable circumstances all together, but it was still the perfect moment.

"Time, I need to talk to you." Tarrant spoke with the seriousness his father had always wanted to see in him.

Time became wary, if not as defensive as before.

For now, he would listen.

The rest was unknown.

"It's about Alice." Tarrant continued. "She always came to me, and now I will go to her. Rest assured, your Chronosphere has no appeal to me because it is not through time I want to travel to."

Time raised an eyebrow. He seldom had felt so confused.

It could also be the very first time the Chronosphere wasn't the main subject of a petition.

The heart of all Time... ignored?

It all felt so uncommon it was almost offensive.

"Through space." Tarrant pointed up, and imagined a clear blue sky he could soar. "Help me build a machine that can travel through space, one that can take me to her world, back to my Alice. I ask nothing more."

It was true.

Tarrant felt it all would fall into place once he was with Alice again.

If they couldn't be together in Underland or in dreams, then they would be together in Upperland and in reality.

In the end, any world they chose was irrelevant.

If he was with her, he knew everyday would be worthy of waking up in the morning.
Each day an adventure, each day bright and fun.
Behold a Lawyer

His life would change for the better that day, James knew it.

He had chosen well. The offer came to him weeks before, but he dared not accepted it right away.

James pondered for days about the cons and pros before making a choice. Once determined, he quit his former job as lawyer and counselor of his old employer, some upstart metal merchant always in distress due the relentless pirate attacks to his cargo ships.

He was always boasting about his dreams of rising to fortune soon, and how all he needed was James' help and more time.

Unfortunately, he had run out of both.

The company was already drowned in debts, and it was tainted by the incompetence of its owner and his opportunistic associates, to whom James had helped behind his boss' back every time he wasn't able to remunerate his monthly payment.

It had been a prosperous couple years at first, and he had been treated well, but now the company's glory days were long gone and no amount of optimism would change that.

James had to leave it behind and move on.

It wouldn't last long anyway.

After bidding a brief farewell, James departed to meet his new employer.

Something inside James almost wavered at the sight of the poor man crying and begging him to stay. He offered him to double his pay and name his firstborn after him. It was only James' counsel what kept his associates from feasting on his shares like hungry crows, after all.

"I'm sorry."

And without taking pride in his actions, James turned his back on him.

It had to be done.

Sentiments and loyalties would only hinder his advancement.

Besides, he had the feeling Lord Ascot would be his most profitable boss to date.

James confirmed it the moment he saw the manor as the carriage took him across the green fields. Farther to the north, he caught a glimpse of a garden labyrinth and a clear pond with rowing boats.

Typical luxuries of gentlemen with too much money on their hands.

The carriage stopped at the manor's doors, where a nervous servant wearing a waistcoat was waiting for him.

"Mister Harcourt, if you please follow me. Lord Ascot will receive you this instant."

James nodded and followed in silence.
Lord Ascot was a family man, James could tell by the many portraits of a woman with a stern look and a snobbish man of his age.

A sentimentalist, sensed James, though it was too soon to reach conclusions.

The servant led him to a studio and knocked the door before entering along with James.

"Lord Ascot, Mister Harcourt is here." The servant bowed.

The Lord, an aged man of sober features, thanked and dismissed the servant. He didn't take his eyes from a map that covered the entire desk.

James approached Lord Ascot and offered him his hand.

"Lawyer James Harcourt. A pleasure to meet you, sir." James said in the same manner he had done with his numerous previous employers. He had done it so many times that the words came out of his mouth as if he was a talking automaton.

Lord Ascot inspected the map a few more seconds before finally accepting the handshake. He smiled, but James didn't reciprocate the gesture.

"Mister Harcourt, I'm glad you accepted my offer." Lord Ascot inspected James as closely as the map. "For one so young, you have quite the reputation. How old are you, lad?"

"Twenty-two, sir." At first, James wondered what kind of reputation backed him.

But did it matter?

Whatever it was, it had helped him land a job in one of London's most successful companies.

He needn't or wanted to know more.

"You are younger than my son Hamish, but still twice as responsible. Perhaps you could give him counsel; some friendly advice from someone closer to his age may help him widen his vision." Suggested Lord Ascot with a cheery mood.

James shrugged.

He was a lawyer, not a friend for rent.

"Perhaps. I'd rather counsel the board first."

Lord Ascot frowned at James.

He didn't seem angry, just confused.

"Are you alright, lad?"

"Yes." James said dryly.

He wondered if he had been too direct. Lately, it had become a bad habit of his.

"Of course." Lord Ascot went behind his desk, took out some archives from the counter and handed them to James. "Here's all the information about our Company: our yearly profits, estimated losses, prime products and our associates. Make sure to read it well, and shall you need anything else, ask me right away."
"I will." James made a small reverence and prepared to leave. "I must go. Goodbye, sir. I'll make sure to prove useful to this company and to the board."

Not having anything else to say, James turned on his heels and went to the door.

He saw Lord Ascot trying to offer him a cup of wine.

He wanted to start a conversation, but James didn't.

They had spoken the essential.

The rest was a waste of time.

"By the way, Mister Harcourt."

James stopped with his fingers already on the knob.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow I'll be having a celebration. It is a big occasion, you see. My son will propose marriage to the daughter of one of my former associates. A great man he was, Charles Kingsleigh. He would have been so proud."

Lord Ascot's eyes shone with nostalgia.

James confirmed it.

His new employer was a sentimentalist.

"My sincerest congratulations to your son."

"Thank you." Lord Ascot saw the young lawyer was about to leave, so he quickly added: "You are new to my company, and all of my associates will be there. You'd do well to go too, lad. It's a golden opportunity for you to get to know them."

"Yes, sir."

"There will be music and dancing too. Many of the guests will be close to your age, so I'm sure you'll find it easy to enjoy yourself."

"Yes, sir." James replied, not exactly happy of being dragged to a celebration of the sort. "I'm sorry, but I must see to other matters. I'll meet you again tomorrow. Farewell."

With that, he left.

He walked his way home, as the carriage driver was too busy chattering with the servants.

Once in his apartment, James spent the rest of the day reading Lord Ascot's papers and analyzing possible strategies to make the company prosper.

He went to sleep immediately after, as he had nothing better to do.

The idea of having to attend to Lord Ascot's celebration kept him awake for a while. He hated those meetings, but he had no choice but to attend. He didn't want to offend his new employer with his absence.
If he did, he would lose his job.

James couldn't take that risk.

It was all he had after all.

"James." Hamish took a sip from his glass of wine. "May I call you Jim?"

"No."

"I am glad to see my father is hiring people from our generation, Jim. We already have enough decrepit old fools as associates, don't you agree? And nothing so old should be allowed to meddle with the matters of my future company."

James shrugged. It was seldom he disliked someone so much and as quickly as Hamish.

Was he truly Lord Ascot's heir?

It was a pity.

"Not that I resent them, I know they mean well, but there comes a time for everyone to set aside and make room for younger and better men like ourselves. It's only natural. After all, the judgment of a senile man is no more sensible than a woman's." Hamish laughed at his own wit.

James looked to the other side and sighed. The idea of boring to death in the company of Lord Ascot and his associates seemed like paradise in comparison with putting up with Hamish any longer.

"You don't speak a lot, do you Jim?"

"No."

They remained in silence.

"Jim, are you still here?" Asked Hamish, noticing the lawyer's indifference.

"Sadly."

"What was that?"

"I said yes." James' had to make use of every ounce of his patience to remain cordial. He wished he could run away and leave behind that red-haired twit before he continued with his conversation, if his stupid blabbering could still be labeled as such.

Hamish looked at him from head to toe with disgust.

"What a shame. I thought we'd understand each other, but now I see you have the soul of a bitter old man. That's sad. Are all lawyers like this, or is it just you Jim?"

"You shouldn't generalize so quickly. Otherwise, people who met you would think the Ascot family is all the same." Said James, hoping Hamish would understand the implication.

He certainly had overestimated Hamish's perception. Instead of an insult, it felt like a compliment to Hamish, who felt his ego rise up to the clouds.

"We are charming and noble people indeed." He proclaimed, as if he was a king about to be
crowned. "Maybe you are not so bad after all, Jim."

"It's James."

Lady Ascot's interrupted, and announced to Hamish that the Kingsleigh women had finally arrived.

"We are not even married yet, and that woman is already making me wait." Hamish scoffed. "May you find a better prospect to marry, Jim."

Much to James' happiness, Hamish was soon gone along with Lady Ascot.

The dancing took place, and Lord Ascot suggested James to find a partner and join in. Maybe he could ask one of the twins, or the other Kingsleigh daughter, Margaret, whose husband was too busy talking with another woman since the celebration started.

James thanked the invitation, but he declined.

He instead asked Lord Ascot for his permission to be in his studio and have access to some documents James wanted to study.

"I appreciate your dedication, lad." Lord Ascot said. "But don't overwork yourself. Try to have fun while you can."

"Yes, sir." Said James, and five minutes later, he was in the studio, surrounded by piles of books and papers, as if they were his fortress against the party in the garden.

People with fortunes had the luxury to waste their time and money on those idle matters, but men like James had not that privilege.

Fate could turn its wheel against him at any moment.

One step in the wrong direction and his career would fall apart, and he would end up like many others of his young fellow lawyers, begging for the alms of some minor lord that only fed them his crumbles.

A few minutes passed, filled only with the repetitive analysis of the accounts of the company's associates. Eventually, a servant came looking for him, saying Hamish would now propose marriage to Kingsleigh under the gazebo, where all the guests could see.

"I'll be there." Said James.

The servant believed him and left.

Poor fool.

Instead, James put his work aside and decided to inspect the map Lord Ascot had studied with so much interest the day before.

"The map of the world." James said as he checked the several routes traced across the seas. They led to distant lands.

Rangoon? Jakarta?

Too risky for good business, he feared.

Lord Ascot was a mad man for having considered those routes in the first place. James would
abandon the company if his Lord still was determined to pull them through.

Such ideas were nice as long as they stayed as dreams, not as serious considerations for the future of a company.

James had played with similar aspirations in his teens, about traveling to the other side of the world in search for all sort of adventures.

Juvenal aspirations he was glad he had grown out from.

Yet, it felt good to think of the times when he had longed for something more than just fortunes.

They seemed so long ago.

"Better that than to end up in the streets." James snapped out of his thoughts and walked away from the map.

He had no time to waste on the crazy aspirations of Lord Ascot; he had a job to do and dreaming about the past wouldn't get it done.

James went back to his books and documents, and found comfort in them, even if it was hollow and monotonous.

Time passed, a few hours maybe, and the servant came back again.

He looked distressed.

"Please, Mister Harcourt." He pleaded. "Lady Ascot will blame it on me if you don't go."

James groaned and went to the gazebo.

Along the way he saw the twins talking with the other guests, their voices too loud and expressive.

Apparently, from what James could catch, the proposal hadn't gone as planned and the Kingsleigh girl had ran away, leaving Hamish standing like a fool in front of anyone.

James smiled.

Funniest thing he had heard in days.

He also saw Lord Ascot and his wife talking with a blonde woman.

"Ah, Mister Harcourt. Glad you decided to join us again." Lord Ascot put a hand on his back, while his wife glared at him. "Helen, this is James Harcourt, the new lawyer of the board. James, this is Helen Kingsleigh, mother of my future daughter-in-law and widow of Charles."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Kingsleigh." James put a hand on his chest and bowed his head.

"What a charming young man." Said Helen, with a faint smile brightening her sad face.

The compliment took James by surprise. He couldn't remember the last time someone had referred to him as anything else other than boring and quiet, even less charming.

It felt good.

"Thank you."
"Helen, I do ask you not to praise his behavior as something admirable." Lady Ascot spat. "Curtsey and charm are something to be expected from all our employees, not some tricks the lawyer pulls out of his sleeve to make up for his low-key impudence."

"My dear, please." Said Lord Ascot.

"Of course, I apologize. If you excuse me." James made a reverence and retreated back into the crowd.

He feared he would cause a scene if he stayed in the presence of Lady Ascot.

He knew he had only tasted a drop of her venom.

Nobody went looking for him.

It was for the better.

One of the twins was eyeing him from afar when the Kingsleigh girl returned.

She was almost as pale as him.

Her blue dress was covered in mud; her golden hair was messy and full of leaves and sticks.

She also had nasty looking scars on her arm.

Where had she gone to?

A battle?

Her family and Lord Ascot worriedly asked her if she was alright.

She claimed she was, but James had his doubts.

"I'm sorry, Hamish. I can't marry you. You're not the right man for me. And there's that trouble with your digestion."

James almost drew blood from biting his lip to stop himself from laughing. A few people saw him and giggled, but thankfully they were his only witnesses.

He had no idea what she was doing, but it was rather amusing to see Hamish so taken aback.

He watched her as she spoke with several of the guests, including an old woman with a perturbed appearance, the twins, her mother, her sister and even Lady Ascot.

James didn't find the whole matter as funny anymore.

Had she lost her head?

Perhaps she had suffered a fall and needed some time to rest before she could think clearly again.

James was about to speak up his idea when Lord Ascot talked first.

"You've left me out." He said to her.

"No, I haven't sir. You and I have business to discuss."

She spoke with enough eloquence, all things considered.
"Shall we speak in the study?" Offered Lord Ascot.

James felt a twinge of fear. Was his boss serious, or was he just playing along?

"Oh, by the way." Said the Kingsleigh girl, and lifted her dress to reveal her missing stockings and do a weird dance that offended most of the guests.

James was too disconcerted to feel any offense at all.

He watched her go to the same study he had been before, with Lord Ascot going after her.

Hamish had a hissy fit and his mother had to calm him down, while Miss Kingsleigh and her other daughter worried about the state of…

What was her name?

He had heard it whispered among the mouths of the gossip guests. He made an effort to remember.

"Alice." He muttered.

Now that there would be no wedding in the future, the celebration was as well as death, so there was no reason to linger around anymore.

James thought of Alice as he walked back to his apartment.

Not all of his thoughts for her were gentle. He didn't feel offended by her behavior, but her way of proceeding was too strange for him to embrace, even less to understand.

She had thrown away the prospect of a stable life offered to her on a silver platter.

It was careless, even foolish.

Had he been in her place, the thought wouldn't have crossed his mind, even if it meant putting up with someone like Hamish for life.

James knew first hand there were worse things to endure in life than snobbish relatives.

"Alice." James repeated, this time with some annoyance.

Why couldn't she have done as he did, and embrace a life that made up with stability what it lacked in joy?

"I don't understand you."

And so he pushed her out of his thoughts.

It was for the best.

She was making him doubt, and doubt had no place in his profession or in his life.

James just wished Lord Ascot wouldn't take her business proposals seriously.

A dreamer, after all, had no place among the realm of merchants.

If she wanted to belong, she would have to get rid of those childish dreams first.

Otherwise, she wouldn't last.
It was a fact of the real world.
James knew it, and she should too.

James was summoned by Lord Ascot two days after the failed celebration. He met with his boss in a relative good mood.

He was eager to share his many ideas on how to dispose legally of the weakest associates of the Company, and how to keep the profits safe and growing.

The subject of conversation however, proved to be of a much different nature.

"Absolutely not. This is madness and it will ruin us." Exclaimed James.

"No need to get so angry, lad. I just ask you to keep this information secret for now."

"I’m sorry Lord Ascot, but as lawyer of the board, it is my duty to inform them of your hasty decision at once. They must know."

Lord Ascot blocked his way with his arm. He remained gentle, though no less authoritative.

" You must understand that the members of the board are all intelligent men, but they are trapped in their old ways. They wouldn't agree to this if they knew."

"Neither do I, sir." Replied James.

"Then maybe you are trapped in the old ways too." Said Lord Ascot.

James frowned.

"Do you think I'm against it because she is a woman?" James asked, without giving time for an answer. "It is quite unusual, but irrelevant. A pair of hands are valuable if they are useful, not if the chest behind them is flat or round."

Lord Ascot laughed.

"A rough way to put it. Why then are you so opposed to the idea?"

"A travel to China, leaded by someone with no knowledge about navigation or business procedures? It sounds more like the start of a bad joke than a serious proposal from a company."

"Alice has a decent perception of how to manage herself at sea and how a trading company works. Knowing Charles, I'm sure he told her many stories about his adventures at sea and how he planned to carry out his trading ideas. Trust me, she'll learn and handle herself fine."

James had enough information to put the pieces together.

He should have known.

"I see. You are trying to pay tribute to your former associate and friend by humoring his daughter's dreams. A fine sentiment, lord Ascot, but we are a company, not a wish factory. We cannot afford to take these risks."

James knew by the expression of his lord that he had touched a raw nerve.
"Charles Kingsleigh, a man of many ideas but no common sense, judging by the state of his accounts at the time of his death." He continued. "I'm sure he was a good man, but you cannot let-

Every muscle on Lord Ascot's face tensed.

"You know nothing of Charles, lad. Do not speak of him with so much liberty. One of my biggest regrets in life is not supporting his expeditions when I had the chance."

Ah, it made sense now. So those plans on the map about exploring the world were never of Lord Ascot, but of Charles Kingsleigh.

The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree.

It was James' duty to guide Lord Ascot stray from those sentiments and bring reason to the whole matter.

If that didn't work, he knew a way for him to get out of that mess not empty handed.

"Whatever your reasons, I'm bound by my ethical code to inform the board of anything that may harm our interests, sir. I'm sorry, I wish we could reach to an agreement."

First, James would let his words sink and disturb his lord's mind, and the he would proceed to tell him the amount necessary to keep his lips sealed in front of the board.

A cheap trick, but it worked every time.

Instead, Lord Ascot laughed sardonically.

"Trying to bribe me while preaching an ethical code. Mister Harcourt, your reputation is well earned." Lord Ascot said with malice and pity, as if he was a parent finding comfort in scolding his child. "To be this young and so crooked... No wonder you are so miserable."

It was like a stab in the heart for James.

So that's how everyone saw him? As some sort of wretched lawyer for hire, little more than a mercenary they unleashed whenever their companies were at risk.

The wound cut deeper because all was true, and James knew it.

Lord Ascot, now free of his anger, regretted his harshness and tried to apologized, but James tried to leave the studio before he could talk.

He slammed the door open and hit Hamish with it. He had eavesdropped on them for only heaven knew how long.

After recovering, he grabbed James by the arm and leaned closer to him.

He was grinning.

"Don't worry Jim, I support you. Let's bribe the old man and then tell the board all about his folly. We'll gain their trust and respect." Hamish whispered to James. "My father and his precious Alice deserve it for what they've done to me."

It sounded as if Hamish admired him and considered him his friend.

James felt no flattery, only disgust.
Not for Hamish, but for himself.

"Now's our chance, Jim." Said Hamish, nodding towards his father. "He won't be around for long anyway."

James pushed him away with more forced he intended. Hamish crashed again the wall and fell down.

"You rotten…" James muttered, but couldn't say more.

He was one to talk.

"Hamish!" Lord Ascot went to his son's aid. Hamish put on a façade and claimed his back was hurt. James stepped back little by little, and when Lord Ascot looked at him, he escaped.

He caught the attention of the servants, but nobody went after him.

Questions and doubts plagued him as he ran back to his apartment, following the same path he ever took. The routine was so inscribed in his body it didn't need his mind to guide him home.

Nothing was certain for him anymore.

Had he truly injured Hamish?

Why had he tried to bribe Lord Ascot?

There had been no need or thought in it at all. It was just an impulse he blindly followed.

Was he fired?

Was his career over?

Would he end up in the streets again?

Was he crooked?

Was he miserable?

To the last two he knew the answer. He had known it for years.

But it didn't matter!

Better to be miserable in emotion than in coin. James knew that well.

That was his creed, his path to a peaceful life. It had worked well for years.

So why doubt about it now?

Why?

Why?

"James."

Alice gently put her hand on his arm. James slowly calmed down and his breathing settled.
"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, take all the time you need."

"No, I'm alright. I just hadn't thought about it much."

That was true. That had been a dreadful day for James, one when he thought all he had worked for, his whole life would go to waste.

Just remembering it drained a lot of his energy.

To add to his distress, there was his fear of what Alice would think of him now.

He had been honest so far, but he knew that honesty was always double edged. It cleaned dirty consciences but also drew people away.

"I wish I had met you at the celebration." Said Alice slowly. "We could have laughed at Hamish and his digestion together."

She hoped to hear James laugh, but he remained serious.

"You wouldn't have liked me then."

Alice had to admit he had a point.

"I don't think you would have liked me either."

"For a while, I didn't."

Alice didn't know how to feel about his statement.

"Because I decided to set sail?" She inquired harshly, though she wasn't surprised. Her decision hadn't made anyone happy except for herself and Lord Ascot. "Because a woman with wild ideas would be the end of the company?"

"You would never ruin it, Alice." James said. "All I said about the risks and my obligation to inform the board were lies I told Lord Ascot. The company was doing well, and it wasn't going to fall apart by your daring expedition."

Alice calmed down, though deep inside, she remained upset.

"I don't understand. We hadn't even met face to face or talked to each other. Why did you resent me so, James?"

"You were following your dreams and taking risks." James declared without looking at her. "I couldn't stand it. I thought it was insulting, I thought that dreamers were all pampered fools wasting their time, money and opportunities in their banal whims, as if everyone else had the privilege to do the same."

James rested his elbows on his thighs and rubbed his forehead.

"Or maybe that was an excuse I used to trick myself as I tricked my clients. Maybe I was a bitter coward envious of anyone who dared to try what I dared not. That's the kind of man I had become."

For the first time in a long time, Alice didn't find the right thing to say.
If she claimed that James was exaggerating, it would not only be insulting, but also an understatement.

If he said that's the man he had been, Alice could only believe him. He spoke with too much honesty for her to think something else.

Outside, afternoon came and turned the sky orange. The train wasn't going to move until night, or perhaps until the next morning.

There was no point in worrying about the Ambassador anymore, though Alice still wished to go to Pekin to sell the grand father clock.

They still had plenty of time to talk, and that was good for James, because he still had plenty to say. Among it, there was the part he feared the most.

"The next day, I sent a letter to Lord Ascot, promising I wouldn't tell anything to the board." James continued. "I thought he was going to thank me and say I was fired, but he invited me to see your parting."

Alice remembered that day. His mother, Margaret, Lord Ascot and even his wife... they all had been there.

"You weren't there." She said, not finding James' in her memories.

"I was." Corrected James. "I saw you sail away from afar, and I kept watching until the Wonder was out of sight. I wanted to get closer, but-

"Let me guess, your pride kept you from doing it."

"To an extent, yes. But there was something else... someone rotten."

Alice needn't ask. She knew.

He had gotten in her way too.

"Hamish."

"Yes. It was the first of the many times he would come to me with his ideas and plans in the three years you were at sea. I soon learned he had more wit than I thought." James looked at Alice. It was the first time he did since he started his story. "And that he was just as crooked as me."
Tarrant believed that, Time being Time, would always take Little of himself when making decisions about matters that weren't related to the Chronosphere or Underland's flow of time and reality.

Time wouldn't bother thinking for too long about the trivial matters of the mortals. It wasn't in his nature to do so.

Tarrant was sure of it, and so he had expected an immediate answer to his petition.

His judgement however, only showed how little Tarrant knew of Time, and all he got from him was silence.

Grimly, Time sat down on the leather chair in front of the chimney and contemplated the fire for many minutes, brushing his moustache with his fingers.

"So…" Tarrant ventured.

Time glowered at him.

Scared, Tarrant bit his tongue. It was probably best to leave Time in peace.

The deeper Time was in thought, the stronger the gears on his heads clinked and sparkled, exhaling numerous puffs of steam.

Wilkins snapped his fingers at the Favorite Second, and it soon was sitting on one of Time's shoulder pads. It continuously poured oil in the engines behind its Mater's head.

"Too much overheating disturbs his thinking." Explained Wilkins to Tarrant, after the butler noticed the hatter's curiosity. He was standing next to him, with his hands behind his back.

"Yes, of course. One should always keep a cool head when making decisions!" Said Tarrant.

Wilkins sighed and pretended he hadn't heard.

"It could also cause him great harm." Wilkins continued. "If only one of his gears or cogs was to melt down…"

"What would happen then?"

"You don't want to know." Stated Wilkins, giving a definite end to the banter.

That was a shame for Tarrant, who soon found the waiting too boring to continue standing still. He decided to walk around the room quietly in search for something to distract himself with, thought there wasn't much to look at after his Favorite Second had destroyed most of Time's decorations and trinkets.

The books on the shelves didn't entertain Tarrant for long either, except for one with several poems written in a weird language.

It was a curious piece.

"Please, can you not touch what remains of Time's book collection?" Wilkins asked with curtsey but
little patience. "That Second already destroyed half of it, and you needn't add to its squander."

"Don't worry so much, Wilkins." Grunted Tarrant, putting the book back in its place. "So much stress is making a grump out of you."

"It's part of my job, sir. I'm just doing what I must." Wilkins said, with equal resignation and seriousness.

Tarrant was tempted to ask him why, not out of interest, just for the sake of having a conversation. Instead, he saw something that finally caught his attention.

It was Time's hat. Tarrant picked it up and dusted it off.

Though out fashioned and not too comfortable, it was a clearly the job of a master hatter. Resistant and perfectly tailored.

A marble of his trade, Tarrant had to admit, even if his tastes of design and composition were different.

It was antique, but maybe with just a few modifications and upgrades….

"I know you don't like me very much and you think I'm a clumsy clown." Tarrant said to Wilkins, as he helped him pick up the many metal pieces from the floor.

The butler laughed and nodded.

"Sir, trust me, my thoughts are not so simple. That's not half of what I truly think about you."

"But anyway, can I use some of this spare pieces and Time's tools for a moment?" Tarrant asked, not hearing to what the butler had said. "I won't take long, I promise."

Wilkins looked at him with his eyes half closed, holding a bunch of cogs in his arms.

"What for?" He inquired with a suspicious tone.

"It's a surprise." Whispered Tarrant while pointing at Time, who was still deeply lost in thought.

Wilkins' answer, unlike Time's, was immediate.

"Absolutely not." He spoke with all the authority his squeaky voice allowed. "This metal is not the same you mortals use to build your vulgar creations. It is one of a kind, only used to keep Grand Clock in good shape and many other important matters you wouldn't understand. You can't just use it to adorn a hat! What an idea."

"Think it about it this way, Wilkins. Time is the Grand Clock and the Grand Clock is Time, right?" Asked Tarrant, to which Wilkins agreed. "They are one and the same. Now, if Time is out fashioned, then so is the Grand Clock. And this would mean Time has become obsolete. A rather dangerous concept, isn't it? It could render Time as irrelevant!"

Wilkins had no words.

For such a stupid reasoning, it made sense.

Or maybe for something so senseless, it actually wasn't all that stupid.

"Just be quick about it." Wilkins conceded, starting to think that he was getting too old for that job
and wishing he could have his own doses of oil soon. "And no more shouting!"

Tarrant had to cover his mouth. The excitement he always felt when crafting a hat was always encouraging, but now it overwhelmed him. The fact he was about to use all the knowledge of his trade on the hat that belonged to none other but Time himself was a highlight on the history of his profession, and especially of the Hightopp clan.

His heart sunk at the memory of his family.

It was better he started working at once.

Tarrant quickly became immersed in his job. The seconds and the minutes no longer made sense to him, and all the he cared about for a brief moment were the cogs and chains he sewed, the mechanisms he attached, the silk he cut and the borders he warped.

It made him feel like he was home.

He finished modifying the hat at the same time the echo of a striking pendulum resonated in all the castle. It was a low and chilling sound.

It pulled Time out of his meditations, and he left the room without explaining where he was going or when he would return.

"I swear; they have the worst timing to stop ticking. I can't have a moment of peace, I just can't." Complained Time as he went to attend to the call.

The Favorite Second dutifully remained on his shoulder, much to Tarrant's dismay.

Now he would have to wait in the chamber until Time came back, and that could take from a couple of minutes to a couple of days.

"Wait right here, and don't open the wardrobe. Getting the dodo and all those birds back inside is not as easy as it seems."

Of course, he still had Wilkins to guide him!

The leader of the Seconds could be intelligent, but he certainly wasn't fast, and so he could only try to outrun Tarrant as the hatter followed right behind him, regardless of his complaints and threats.

Wilkins hoped the Hour would stop the hatter, but it was the Hour's time for a nap.

"No wonder no one respect us." Wilkins whimpered.

"I do." Answered Tarrant. He was literally stepping on Wilkins' heels.

Wilkins sulked and started to walk, knowing there was no way he could get rid of the Hatter for the moment.

"Please don't talk to me."

"That's rude."

"I don't care."

"That's ruder."
Wilkins sighed.

It was the longest walk he'd ever had.

It didn't take long before they catch up with Time. They found him in the His-shaped corridor, lying on the floor after one of his shoulder pads got stuck along the way again.

"Why does he even have a corridor with his shape?" Tarrant questioned as Time got up, with the Favorite Second jumping back to his shoulder and soothing his master with a doses of oil.

"So he can fit in." Explained Wilkins, shrugging. "He thinks it makes sense."

"It does. A lot." Nodded Tarrant, satisfied with the explanation.

"Why do I even bother?" Said Wilkins, putting a hand on his forehead.

Eventually, they reached the opposite chambers of the Living and Deceased Underlandians. The Minutes guarding the entrance of the Living chamber bowed their heads to Time and stepped aside.

Time entered with a solemn look on his face, and caught a glimpse of Tarrant as he was about to be attacked by the Minutes.

He thought Wilkins would call off the attack, but he had to intervene when one of the Minutes seized Tarrant by ankle and put him upside down.

"Cease with it, imbecile!" He snapped. Tarrant didn't know if Time was referring to him or the Minute, though it could well be both.

The Minute whimpered and was reduced to a docile pup in a heartbeat. It let go of Tarrant without worrying about the hatter hitting his head.

Time didn't worry either. Another small hit wouldn't make the Hatter any crazier than he already was.

Meanwhile, Tarrant got back on his feet while Wilkins tried, rather uncaringly, to keep the Minutes appeased.

"Tell them they can stand down. I have no interest in knowing what happens there." Tarrant explained.

"A few precautions never harmed anybody." Wilkins smirked with condescendence. "I hope you weren't hurt, sir. It was a nasty fall."

"Ah, it was! But nothing can hurt me while wearing this." Tarrant took off his Gyre hat and revealed another hat under it. Wilkins' jaw dropped at the sight of his master's hat.

"You were rendered speechless by its greatness, weren't you?" Asked Tarrant, not without cockiness. "It's isn't perfect, but it's not so bad either, just like Time himself. I'm sure he'll like it."

Wilkins stuttered and blabbered incomprehensible things.

"He doesn't need another gift, you fool!" Wilkins exclaimed at last.

"I've been called that a lot lately, and it's starting to annoy me." Tarrant said. "I have a name for a reason."
"Besides, you covered the spot that served as ventilation!" Continued Wilkins, pointing at the part where there once had been a free space, but was now covered by one of the Hatter's improvised mechanisms. "Didn't you hear me when I told you how important is to keep his head from overheating? Nobody listens to me!"

Tarrant patted Wilkins' head as if he was a dog.

"But I did. You just add some oil right here." Explained Tarrant, opening a tiny valve on top of the hat. He whistled as he followed with his finger a small tube that went down to the mechanism he had added. "And Ta-da! It will automatically spray some oil on Time's engines whenever he starts steaming. Genius, isn't it?... Or at least I thought so."

Wilkins own temperature was reaching critical levels, but he cooled down.

The hatter had actually listened to him.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had.

With a gentler disposition, he calmed the Minutes down and put his hands behind his back.

"It is very thoughtful of you." Wilkins gave a weak smile to the hatter. "I'm sure he'd appreciate it, but please sir, I must ask you not to give it to him."

"Why not?" asked Tarrant, checking the hat from all angles, trying to find a flaw.

"Trust me." Insisted Wilkins. It was more of a plea than an explanation. "Just don't."

Confused and a little worried for Wilkins, Tarrant put the two hats on and patted the butler's head again.

"Don't feel bad, I can make you a hat too." He offered with a gleeful smile. "Yes, I can! Just tell me what you want on it and I'll take care of the rest. I can even make hats for the Minutes and Seconds too. Each one personalized, of course."

Wilkins opened his eyes widely.

"That offer is not necessary." He said. "But it is appreciated."

Tarrant, though a bit disappointed, was happy to finally see Wilkins dropping his defensive façade.

A second later, Time returned.

He was holding a closed pocket watch on his hand.

Tarrant looked away, knowing it was the sleeping soul from someone. He wondered how Time could hold it with so much indifference.

Perhaps habit had dulled all sentimentality.

"Hatter." Time's voice was too authoritative for Tarrant to ignore.

He looked at him, trying his best to keep his eyes away from the pocket watch.

It was difficult for him to decipher Time's expression. At first glance, he appeared to be angry, but if one looked at him long enough, something resembling sadness would color his features.
"Yes?" A confused Tarrant asked.

The Second on his shoulder poured oil one last time before jumping down. It rubbed itself softly against Tarrant's leg and went to Wilkin's side.

Its eyes never departed from the floor.

Time went to the entrance of the opposite chamber, where Underlandians could find their eternal rest. The Minutes opened the gates for him and he entered.

"Come with me."

Tarrant and Wilkins were equally surprised and against the idea.

Tarrant knew nothing good waited for him in that chamber.

Wilkins despised the idea of mortals having access to them.

The girl, Alice, had reminded him why.

Wilkins wasn't going to forget it anytime soon.

Yet, he couldn't do a thing when the Hatter decided to follow Time inside the chamber of the deceased. The idea of ordering the Minutes to attack him was tempting, but Wilkins couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Honestly." Sighed Wilkins as the Minutes closed the gates behind the Hatter. The Second leaned against his arm. Fondly, Wilkins patted its head. "I'm getting too old for this job."

Tarrant knew the true meaning of cold and darkness the moment he took his first step inside the chamber. It felt as if his life slipped away with every breath he took.

The pocket watches hanging from the nothingness above were like silent graves doomed to oblivion. And he was right.

Many of those names were already forgotten by everyone in Underland.

Only Time remembered them.

It was hardly a solace.

Being remembered by nobody was hardly any different than being remembered by someone who didn't care.

"Don't fall too far behind." Time said.

Tarrant closed his eyes and quickened his pace.

Abruptly, Time stopped. Tarrant did the same after he ceased hearing his footsteps.

With fear, he opened his eyes.

He could see how Time watched him with pity, and extended his hand to him.

He tried to avoid that sight and looked up, only to find a pendulum with an encrypted letter H. Behind it, there was an empty chain hungry for a watch to hold for all eternity.
Tarrant gasped and closed his eyes again until his eyelids hurt, thinking that if he took even the smallest glance at the watch on Time's hand, he would collapse.

It was only inches away. Tarrant had never desired to run away in his life as much as he did in that moment.

"Don't see the name, don't hear the name…" Tarrant hummed as he covered his ears.

"Hatter, you know what must be done." Insisted Time.

"I don't belong here. Why did you bring me here?" Asked Tarrant in despair. "It's cruel."

Time hesitated and lost some of his sympathy at the undeserved accusation.

"The last words this soul will ever hear before departing will be either my usual speech, or the farewell of its relative. Your choice." He declared sternly.

Tarrant knew Time wouldn't wait too long for him to decide.

With his remaining courage, Tarrant opened his eyes.

He was sure the watch's cover would show him his father's name.

It did not.

The relief he felt lasted nothing, and pain invaded his heart.

Poomally Hightopp

He took the watch from Time's hands, who barely gave him a moment to grief.

"Put it in its rightful place." Time said, thinking his guidance would lessen the hatter's pain.

Tarrant couldn't move. Instead, he stared with a soulless eyes at the broken watch that once had been his aunt.

Now she was nothing, only a memory.

Time realized he had made a mistake.

Now he knew that the task of putting their dead to rest was too unbearable for mortals.

Willingly or not, he had been cruel.

Regretting his ignorance, he attempted to take the watch back and hang it himself, like he had done for countless millenniums.

"Forgive me, it wasn't my intention- "

"No." Tarrant muttered, swallowing the lump in his throat. "It's… it's alright. I'll do it."

With a gentleness Time thought inexistent in someone as clumsy as the hatter, Tarrant joined the watch to chain.

"My dear aunt, you never understood me." Tarrant said as he caressed the watch with his thumb. "But you always loved me, and I won't forget that. Don't worry about Bim; he's a restless lad, but he'll turn into a good man. He loves you, like we all did. I promise our family will take care of him.
Rest peacefully, you deserve it and so much more. Fairfarren."

The watch lost all of its weight. Tarrant felt as if he was holding nothing.

Poomally was gone.

He let go of the empty watch and remained in the same position for a while. His sight was blurred, but he didn't cry. Maybe he would once the pain sunk deeper, but for the moment, it was still too fresh and dull.

"Do you know where her body is?" Asked Tarrant with a sour voice.

The question took Time off guard.

"Your family doesn't know?"

"After I rescued her from the Ant Farm, Aunt Poomally started wandering on her own, digging holes night and day. Sometimes, she would wander too far away and we'd have to go and search for her. Her son, my nephew Bim, was usually the one who brought her back home." Tarrant remembered those times with fondness and bitterness alike. "But one day, we couldn't find her. We search everywhere, but it was in vain. Bim still goes and looks for her every day."

Time remained quiet.

Tarrant was still staring at her aunt's watch.

"Dig, dig, dig. Work, work, work. EARTHQUAKE!" Tarrant chanted. "That's all she could say, not a word more. She wasn't the same person she used to be, no one in my family is. The Bloody Big Head did that to them, and yet I'm expected to forgive her."

Tarrant anger's mixed with his grief, but the second overcame the former, and so he managed to keep his composure.

The mention of the Red Queen brought back bad memories to Time's mind. He hadn't been the only one that had suffered under Iracebeth's cruel hand. At times, that was easy to forget.

"There's nothing I can do, hatter." Said Time as respectfully as he could. "To me, you are all nothing but pocket watches. I can sense when you are alive, but I'm blind about how you spend your time, or where your bodies are put to rest in Underland."

"I see." Said Tarrant. "Did she die peacefully?"

"I do not know."

"I see."

"Hatter, there's something else I can't do." Time knew it wasn't the best moment, but he had no choice. The sooner he got on with it, the better it would be for everyone. "I won't help you find Alice. I understand you miss her, but that isn't of my concern. You are on your own."

"I see. Let's go back, please."

Time nodded. The Hatter said nothing in their way to the entrance.

Wilkins, the Favorite Second and the Minutes were there to welcome them. The Second tried to catch Tarrant's attention, but he ignored it.
All he wanted to do was to leave that castle and everyone in it behind.

"Time, thank you for letting me stay for so long and for considering my petition." Tarrant bowed his head. "Fairfarren. Wilkins, will you guide me back to the red room?"

"Of course, sir." The Leader of the Seconds agreed instantly, and one could swear he was smiling.

Time watched him go. The sad Second snuggled against his Master's leg, too affected by the Hatter's indifference.

"Hatter." Said Time before Tarrant was gone. "You think I'm cruel, but try to understand that my responsibilities don't allow me to do things for others. That's how it must be."

"I understand." Tarrant sadly smiled at Time. "And I don't think you're cruel. Oh, and by the way…"

The loss of his aunt almost made him forget. He took off both hats and handed Time his own.

Time inspected it carefully, not completely pleased with its new design.

He then glared at Tarrant with contained reproach.

"Bribes won't make me change my mind, Hatter." He stated firmly.

"It isn't a bribe, my friend." Tarrant said as he finished bidding farewell to his Favorite Second. "It's a gift."

Time didn't answer, not even to thank him. Tarrant hadn't expected him to do so, and he returned to Wilkins' side.

The butler didn't stop praising Tarrant for his good judgement, expressing how happy he was to see he had finally understood that Time didn't want to have visitors in his castle ever again. Wilkins hadn't been in a better mood in ages.

Soon, he and the hatter stood in front of the grandfather clock.

"You know the way, sir." Wilkins opened the clock's door.

With heavy steps and looking down, Tarrant entered he clock.

It was true he was only a clumsy clown, but Wilkins couldn't help but to take pity on the Hatter.

"Sir, you have to overcome this. You still have time, don't waste it on impossible dreams. Just be happy, that's all you are meant to do." He said to him, but Tarrant kept walking. "Auf Wiedersehen."

He closed the door, and this time, it was for good.

Only then, everything could finally go back to normal, to the way it was supposed to be, with no greedy interlopers disturbing Time ever again.

Wilkins would make sure of that.

That was the sole reason of his existence.

Tarrant mourned for days.

He wasn't the only one.
The Schnozzless’ sprout never bloomed, and had succumbed to the Outlands unforgiving conditions soon after Tarrant departed to Time's castle.

As much as he regretted his friend's loss, Tarrant had little space in his mind and his heart for anyone besides his Aunt and his family.

Above all, he thought of his nephew Bim. He deserved to know.

Tarrant had to go back home and tell him, but he was unable to return to Witzend anymore.

It was mostly because of his longing for Alice, but also for the fear of putting his family through another experience as horrible as their imprisonment in the Ant Farm.

He couldn't act as if nothing had happened when there were reminders everywhere of the mark the Red Queen had branded in the Hightopp clan.

Not even his loyalty for Mirana would be able to keep him in check if the Red Queen crossed his way again.

It was only a matter of time before he lost control and did something, and his family would pay the consequences.

No, as long as the queens went on with their delusional truce charade, there was no place in Witzend for Tarrant.

Maybe his aunt Poomally had felt the same way.

He wished he had known her better, before the Iracebeth had scarred her mind beyond recognition.

It was a regret that whispered in his ear in the days to come.

Tarrant slowly went back to his daily life in the Outlands.

Routine and work silenced the regretful voice eventually, and Tarrant’s inspiration to go to Upperland returned with more intensity than before.

Alice was the only home he could go back to, and he wouldn't give up on the hope of seeing her again.

He wouldn't add it to his many regrets in life.

With renewed spirits, Tarrant began with his attempts to go to Upperland, in spite of the lack of Time's help. It wasn't the first occasion Time wasn't on his side, and yet, Tarrant had managed to overcome them all.

There was no reason to think this would be the exception.

"Alice, wait for me. We'll be together soon." He promised, holding his Gyre Hat in his hand.

With all the strength he had gained in the Outlands, Tarrant launched it upwards to the sky. It took him higher than he thought possible, and as he pierced thorough the gray clouds, he believed he would succeed.

But the hat was no machine, and so Tarrant fell down.

He tried again the next day, and the day after.
Whenever he felt discouraged, he looked at the new sprout his friend had planted.

She hadn't given up, so why should he?

His body endured the crashes, but it started to take its toll after the first week.

Tarrant bandaged his wounds and sew the holes in his clothes with the red creepers. He soon became a red presence that soared the sky only to go back to the ground.

One day, he ate a generous ration of the red creepers and decided to climb up to the highest part of the hear-shaped castle and throw his Gyre Hat stronger than ever before.

"Look at you. Stubborn as a mule and as foolish as only mortals can be."

Tarrant almost lost his balance. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

Wearing the hat he had modified for him, and with a bag full of metallic spare parts by his side, Time looked at Tarrant with his arms on his hips.

"Do you think that stupid hat of yours will take you to the kindergartner? Learn your limits!"

"Time!"

Tarrant threw himself at Time with his arms wide open. Time stepped aside before he could hug him, and Tarrant face planted on the floor.

"What is wrong with you? Control yourself!"

Compared to his most recent falls, that was just a tiny scratch, and he couldn't stop laughing as he laid like a plank next to Time's feet.

"You are here…" Tarant said with tears of happiness blurring his sight.

"But I never said I came to help you, you fool. I just came to find that stupid Second that is so fond of you. Then I'll go back to my castle and you shall never see me again."

"But it is standing right there." Tarrant pointed at his Favorite Second, who was sitting on Time's left shoulder pad.

"Oh. Well, my job here is done. Goodbye." Time then acted as if he suddenly had become offended.

"What? It's not as if this was an excuse to come here, not all. Why do you think that? Your imagination is wild and crazy. I brought enough pieces to build a flying prototype, though that doesn't mean I will give it to you. Stop asking me to do it, hatter!"

"I didn't say anything."

"Oh, but you thought about it, I know it. You think Time is an old, selfish fool who never does anything for others, don't you? Well, you are wrong and I'll prove it to you. And no, I didn't cry when the kindergartner gave me her father's pocket watch! Time never cries, so stop spreading that rumor."

"Time, I have no bloody idea what you are talking about." Tarrant got up and hugged him. Time struggled to get him off. "But thank you."

"If you stain my coat with your tears I'll age back into nonexistence, I swear." Threatened Time. "Then we'll see how much you thank me. Now seriously, get off or I'll tell the Second to attack
you."

"I guess that means it would be … your watch dog."

"I have made a terrible mistake." Lamented Time as the Hatter let go of him and the Second on his shoulder jumped happily on his shoulder.

He saw a green figure holding a flower pot watching them from the other side. Time knew who she was.

She had always been by Iracebeth's side. For what Time remembered, she and her fellow fruit people always trembled whenever he got too close, and it seemed her feelings were unchanged, for she tried to run away and warn the guards about the intruder.

It was Tarrant who stopped her, and though she kept her distance, she managed to accept Time's presence with the curtsey he deserved.

It was a tiny gesture, but it felt good.

Maybe, Time thought, things would be different this time around.

Only He would tell.

Tick, tock…

Tick, tock…

Wilkins watched the hours pass by, waiting for his Master to return.

He had to take care of the Grand Clock.

As long as Time was absent, it was his job to do so with more diligence than before.

"Sir." He whispered to himself, with the Hour, Minutes and Seconds gathering around him. "Come back soon."

Together, they watched the Grand Clock's hands move around.

Tick, tock…

Tick, tock…
He could see her.
He recognized her golden hair.
If only he could get closer...

"You were nervous, I understand that. No hard feelings between us, right Jim?"

But Hamish held him back with an arm around his shoulder, the same way an anchor keeps a ship from drifting away. His annoying friendliness was getting on James’ nerves, who tried desperately to have a better look of the Wonder.

To complicate things further, the piers were overcrowded that day due to the number of the trading ships that shared the Wonder's parting hour.

Then it happened.

The ship started to soar the waves.

The Wonder moved quickly.

James had to hurry.

"So Jim, have you thought about our plan? Bribing my father shall be easy. He is losing the grip of reality with every passing day, and his soft heart clouds his sensibility. Just look at how proud he is of seeing Kingsleigh going off to the sea, like the savage tomboy she's ever been. I can't believe he forced me to be here, after all the humiliation she put me through." Hamish twitched his mouth in disgust.

Hamish kept on talking of his dislike for Alice until a woman buying apples in a fruit post nearby caught his eye. James took the chance to escape.

When he arrived to the piers, the ship was already gone, and so were the people who had been there to see Alice and her crew off.

The only person that remained was Helen, Alice's mother.

James thought of greeting her, but he doubted she would remember him.

Besides, she needed time alone to come to terms with the idea that her child's fate was now in the hands of the ocean.
Thinking it was better to leave the grieving mother in peace, James ran to the end of the pier.

Into the distance, he could see the small silhouette of the Wonder as it made its way to the exotic Eastern lands.

Disappointment left a bitter taste in his mouth.

The ship and the crew were gone, and he was left behind.

It seemed that was never going to change.

"You are late, Mister Harcourt." Spoke Lord Ascot without taking the spyglass away from his eye.

In his moping, James had failed to recognize him. He talked to James without a trace of resentment, as if he had lost all memory of James' attempt to bribe him a few days ago.

James respectfully stood next to Lord Ascot as they both watched how the Wonder disappeared amidst the ocean's mist.

"Look at it." Eagerly, Lord Ascot handed the spyglass to James. "Before it's gone."

James was so nervous that the spyglass almost slipped from his hands.

All he could see before the mist engulfed the Wonder in its totality was one last glance of Alice's golden hair.

"I get the feeling I won't be seeing that ship again." Laughed Lord Ascot with melancholy.

James felt a knot in his stomach.

The grim sound of those words caught him off guard.

Did Lord Ascot expect it to get attacked by pirates, or to be destroyed in a storm?

James had thought Lord Ascot would have more faith in Alice than that.

Or had all that expedition been the delusion of an old man?

Hamish maybe wasn't so wrong about his father after all.

Lord Ascot saw James' bewilderment, and he put a hand on his shoulder.

"Walk with me, lad." He offered, and James followed without a word.

As they walked across the piers, they were witness of many other departing ships. Sailors hugged their wives and children, while the merchants wished them good luck and prayed for their cargo to reach its destination safely.

A touching scene, most people would say, but to James it was a waste of time.

Goodbyes were unnecessary, and they delayed the trading process.

That's what he believed in, but now that he had missed the Wonder's departure, he realized that the coldness of his vision was as childish as cruel.

"One would say you have never seen someone saying farewell to his loved ones, lad." Observed Lord Ascot as he and James left behind a trading ship that wouldn't be back for two years or more.
"Those kind sentiments don't concern me. I'm a lawyer, not some poet looking for inspiration for a verse." Replied James, with a politeness that couldn't be called friendly.

It hadn't been his intention to sound so uncaring, but it was difficult for him to talk in any different manner when he hadn't done so in years.

Lord Ascot frowned.

"But have you not people you care about?" He asked with concern. "What about your family?"

"All dead, sir." There was nothing more James could say about the matter.

It was Lord Ascot's time to be ashamed, and he let subject die.

"Forgive me. That was out of place." He apologized after some minutes of silence had cleared the tension between them.

"There's nothing to forgive, sir. You didn't know." James said. Time had taught him not to let anything related to those matters affect him anymore. "Actually, it is I who should apologize for my behavior days ago."

"Yes, I haven't forgotten." Stated Lord Ascot firmly, but not without consideration.

For James, that was a better treatment than he deserved.

"You said you had thought of many strategies to improve the company's economic situations, didn't you?" asked Lord Ascot.

"Yes." Accepted James.

"I want to hear those that don't involve a procedure similar to your bribing attempt. Also, spare me of those that treat our associates like nothing more than numbers or expendable dead weights."

James couldn't name or think of one.

Was he so unable to come up with something that didn't rely on taking advantage of the misfortunes and ignorance of others?

He was indeed pathetic, and while he had been able to let it slide with indifference in the past, now it disturbed him.

Lord Ascot sighed at the sight of him.

"The foulness of your reputation is finally taking its toll on you. One must only take a look at you to see how miserable you feel. At the very least, the fact that it bothers you proves me you are not out of reach."

"With all your respect, Lord Ascot." James' practical mind urged him to speak, regardless of how embarrassed he was. "Why did you hire me in the first place if I'm as infamous as you say? No matter how I see it, it makes no sense to me at all.

"Why, indeed." Lord Ascot stopped walking.

James imitated him.

They were standing close to the market.
"Because I believe my generation judges and condemns the young too quickly, but seldom do we seek to help you find a better way, or give you a chance." Lord Ascot put his hands behind his back and stared at the crowd. "Look at your old employers, those men who so much criticized your methods once you stopped working for them, but were delighted to apply them when it brought them some benefit. They encouraged your behavior, didn't they?"

"I'm not a child, Lord Ascot. I knew what I was doing all along." Accepted James. "I chose to be like this."

"You are responsible for the way you behave, lad." Lord Ascot agreed without enthusiasm. "But my generation is also responsible for the world we tailored for you. A world where such behavior is generously rewarded."

James remembered his first days as a lawyer, and how poor his advancement had been until he decided to play outside the rules.

Once he started, he never stopped.

Not because he couldn't, just because he didn't want to.

"I know there are lawyers who don't depend on petty tricks and betrayals to be successful and live well. "Said James after a long pause. "I'm just too much of a coward to try to be one them. It's impossible for me to be more than I am now."

"The only way to accomplish the impossible is to believe it's possible." Said Lord Ascot. "That's what Charles always used to say. Strange that I shall comprehend his words only after his death, when my own time has run short."

"What exactly does it mean?" Asked James, with the defensive reservations that always surged inside him every time he confronted a new concept, as if he was close to an animal that could maul him at any moment.

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On what you considered impossible, and how willing you are to try to change it." Lord Ascot said as he caught a glimpse of his son, who was talking with a woman not far away from them. Hamish noticed his father, but he ignored him shamelessly, as if he was a mere stranger on the street.

James was deep in thought.

Those flowery words could only come from a man whose head had always been in the clouds.

Charles Kingsleigh.

An interesting man he must have been, though James doubted he would have liked him if he had met him.

Yet, the way he saw life wasn't half bad.

James even dared to say it was admirable.

"So what it's going to be, Mister Harcourt?" Lord Ascot offered his hand. "Are you willing to try the impossible?"
James knew that if he accepted, he would be severing a considerable part of his life, the whole routine he had grown accustomed to after living with it for years.

He would have to start anew.

The thought of it was nothing short of frightening. He wished he had more time to think about it, but time was exactly what he lacked.

He had to choose at once.

Slowly and trembling, he accepted the handshake.

"I will try." He said with hesitation.

"Nicely said, lad." Lord Ascot gave him a reassuring smile.

James reciprocated it.

In that moment, his old ways began to fade away, but unlike the Wonder's and Alice's departure, James wasn't sad to see them go.

"Scared?"

"Change is always difficult." Asserted James.

"Difficult, yes." Muttered Lord Ascot. "But not impossible."

An engine worker offered them dinner.

James and Alice accepted it.

Its taste was nothing extraordinary, and the portion was too small, but they couldn't complain. They knew it was unlikely they would have anything else to eat until the train was repaired and they arrived to Pekin.

Inside the wagon, everything was dark. Alice could see James only thanks to the dim light of the stars.

Most of the other passengers had fallen asleep. They had succumbed either to the overbearing heat or boredom hours ago.

"That's how you started to work for Lord Ascot. This time, with no bribing attempts on your part, I hope." Alice said as she fed Dinah some rice. The cat nibble the food as if it hadn't eaten for days.

James snorted in amusement.

"I would be lying if I said the thought never crossed my mind." He confessed. He cleaned his mouth with the back of his hand. "It cost me greatly to give up all those habits, and it took even more to try to become the lawyer Lord Ascot thought I could be. I spent the months after your departure resisting the temptation of giving up, of going back to the way I used to be."

"But you didn't. That's all you should think about, not of the moments you wavered."
"I only persevered because of Lord Ascot's support…and your mother's too."

"My mother?"

"Yes, she was always kind to me. She used to visit Lord Ascot a lot, mainly to check if you had sent any letters. The two would appease their fears about your well-being with some tea, and they reminisced many stories about you and your father." James recalled with fondness. "It was your mother who first invited me to join them, and soon I found myself listening to their anecdotes with a curiosity I though I had long lost. They told me about your father's plans, about how you believed in him when no one else would, about how expressive you were of your opinions about society, especially about the use of corsets…"

"I am flattered I was the spotlight of your tea time. "Said Alice, blushing a little at the thought of her mother speaking so freely of those matters together with Lord Ascot.

"Sometimes, I must have had a very embarrassed expression on my face, because your mother would then tell me they could change the subject if I wished to."

"And did you?"

"No. There was something about those stories that encouraged me. I can't explain it very well, but…" James cleared his throat. "You, your father, Lord Ascot and your mother… You all helped me when I doubted myself, and I'm grateful for that."

"James." Alice said, with a renewed and beating appreciation for him. "You helped us all too, don't forget that."

Their hands touched by accident. For a second, Alice thought he would hold hers.

But James recoiled from the touch as if the contact had burned him.

"No. I never did." James stared out the window, and he could see Alice's face reflected on the glass. He had not the courage to look at her in any other way. "I hadn't changed at all. I realized it two years after, the day Lord Ascot died and Hamish took over. Only then did I know how the more I thought things had changed, the more I realized they were the same."

He had begged him to reconsider, but as vile and immature as he was, Hamish would always be Lord Ascot's son.

That attachment not even the most sensible of reasonings could match.

Hamish would be the company's heir, and that was his father's final word.

In his final days before he succumbed to the weight of time and years, Lord Ascot made James promise him he would have faith in Hamish, and that he would help him be a good leader for the company, one with a broad vision and an ethical code.

He also made him promise he would try to help Hamish become a better man, just like Lord Ascot had done with James.

But that was a promise that he couldn't keep, not when it meant James would have to witness how
Hamish destroyed everything Lord Ascot had worked for.

It pained him when Hamish disregarded his advice over and over again, and instead urged him to come up with more useful strategies, to revert back to the man James had been.

"You are of no use to me if you will only use your heart instead of your head, Jim. My father is gone and I do not share his beliefs, so you can stop playing the holier-than-thou role. I need a lawyer, not a conscience whispering in my ear."

He repeated the same thing every time James attempted to guide him and stop him from venturing into the same crooked way James had once dwelled.

After months of fruitless attempts, James' patience started to deplete. He thought Hamish would mellow down after getting married, but his wife Alexandra was no nobler than him, and both seemed to be encourage each other's shallowness.

James dared to say that marriage had only accentuated Hamish' immaturity. Now that Alexandra was expecting his child, Hamish was ready to fully become the new Lord Ascot.

His place in society and the continuity of the Ascot bloodline were secured. It boosted his ego to higher levels than James thought possible.

It scared him to think how Hamish would behave once the child was born. He would demand no less respect and flattery than the Queen herself.

All this James endured with stoicism.

However, the last straw was a distasteful jest Hamish made of Alice and Lord Ascot, and how both had been infected by Charles Kingsleigh's stupid madness.

"People like that man belong in the Asylum. In there, he would have been called a king and he could have died with some dignity. Instead, he was company's buffoon to the very end, the butt of every joke. Kingsleigh may not have been so good with business, but he was good for a laugh; don't you agree Jim?"

James would never forget the look on Hamish's face when he stood up to him, in a cloudy day in Lord Ascot's study.

"Your father always wanted the best for you, and hoped you would grow out of your idiotic and cruel ways, but now I see there are things not even time can change." James snapped. "And never call me Jim again, or I shall forget all we are civilized men."

Hamish erased his sardonic smile from his lips. It was the first and last time James would see him behave with so much seriousness.

"If he had wanted the best for me, he never would have burdened me with a company I never asked for." Hamish grinned again, satisfied with having left James speechless "But that doesn't matter now. I own it, and I will lead it as I see fit. You can either agree with me or get crushed under my heel, Harcourt, but I will not tolerate your boring self-righteousness."

"You will fall soon." James put his hat back on. He had no place there anymore, not with someone like Hamish as his boss. "And you will have no one else to blame but yourself. Farewell."

It was the first time James abandoned his employer without showing him the expected respect the gentlemanly etiquette demanded, but Hamish didn't deserve it.
He had many fortunate things he didn't deserve or appreciated.

James cocked his head and hastened his pace.

The sooner he left the house, the sooner he wouldn't have to keep worrying about the Ascots.

He couldn't keep his promise to Lord Ascot of helping Hamish, but he wouldn't forget all he had learned.

James would continue to be an honest man. That was something Hamish couldn't take away from him.

"Mister Harcourt." A steeled voice emerged from the living room. The entrance was only a few steps away, but James’ feet transformed into stone when Lady Ascot appeared with her daughter in law standing behind her, looming in her shadow.

The two women were dressed as elegantly as ever, and neither hid their sense of superiority when James approached them and bowed before them.

"Good evening, ladies."

"Where are you going? My son informed me you had mouch to discuss and you couldn't have finished after just a few minutes." Asserted Lady Ascot with a twitch of her nose.

Alexandra inspected James from head to toe before giving him a forced smile, as she always did.

"Forgive me, Lady Ascot. Your son and I will never have anything else to discuss." James' knew Lady Ascot understood the meaning of his words, judging by the incredulous look on her face.

"Alexandra, leave us. You must rest." Said Lady Ascot. Her daughter in law caressed her womb and obeyed with diligence. She left towards her room with a servant holding her hand and helping her walk.

Once they were alone, Lady Ascot sat down in a velvet coach in front of a tea table filled with various pastries.

"Sit, Mister Harcourt." She ordered as she poured tea in her cup.

"My Lady, I really must be going." Tried to explain James, with his heart racing inside his chest.

Lady Ascot almost crashed the cup after she slammed it against the table. Her eyes were raging, her neck as stiff and tense as the roots of a tree.

"Sit." She repeated without separating her teeth.

She didn't need to raise her voice, and in the blink of an eye, James was sitting in front of her.

She served James tea without asking him if he wanted some.

"Why did you become a lawyer, Mister Harcourt?" She asked after taking a sip from her cup. She added a spoonful of sugar and stirred it as she waited for an answer.

James wasn't expecting those sort of questions. They concerned no one but himself, and were useless to his employers.

In his shock, he could only answer with silence. A silence Lady Ascot used to weave a stronger web
"Do not think I care about your wants in life. I am simply curious about why you would throw away your career when you are so young, especially after considering the cost it came." Lady Ascot's words dripped venom, and they reopened wounds James' thought were scars. "It is not without great sacrifices that poor parents buy a future for their son."

James felt tears accumulating inside his eyes. Only he was supposed to know that, and yet, in front of him there was a ruthless woman speaking of his life as it was the most trivial of matters.

"And as far as I understand it, the toll your parents paid was steep. So much that they couldn't see the fruits of their work in this life." Lady Ascot giggled. "What a shame. I'm sure they would be proud to see the man you've become. From a boy of the slums to a lawyer in a great company… they couldn't have asked for more."

James swallowed a tear that streamed down his cheek. It amazed how vulnerable he became when someone dug their claws in his weak spots.

"I don't think it would be right to disregard their sacrifices so uncaringly. They didn't work themselves to death only to see you begging in the streets again, because that's exactly how you will end up if you dare to quit." Lady Ascot wiped her lips with a handkerchief. "If you leave now, I will make sure no one thinks of offering you a job again, mark my words. Life as a poor man in London is unbearable, or so I've heard. Do you want to return to it, Mister Harcourt?"

"Why are you doing this?" James felt a hollowness in his stomach. He was helpless, completely at the mercy of Lady Ascot.

"Doing what? I'm simply asking you to do your job." Lady Ascot leaned closer to him. James backed down, shrinking in his chair. "My husband and Charles Kingsleigh were good men, but they died poisoned with their dreams of achieving the impossible. You are too young to follow them in their folly, Mister Harcourt. I humored my husband in his last days, but now he is gone and we have to move on to more practical methods. Don't let his delusions hinder your true potential …or your future."

"No."

"Very well. You are free to do as you wish, Mister Harcourt. But I hope you are ready to face the consequences." Lady Ascot finished her tea. "Filial ingratitude is the worst of faults. You are a viler man than I thought. Leave this house at once."

James didn't move.

His body didn't answer to his thoughts.

"What's the matter? I thought you were eager to leave." Said Lady Ascot with superiority. "Or could it be that you wish to stay?"

James wished Lord Ascot was by his side.

He wished it was Helen Kingsleigh he was talking to and not Lady Ascot.

He wished Alice was there. She wouldn't have yielded to those lowly threats, and maybe in seeing how she remained strong, James would have found the same courage inside him too.

But he was alone, and no one would come to his aid.
If he wanted to find strength, he would have to do it by himself.

He searched.

"What's it going to be, Mister Harcourt?"

James found nothing else than the memories of his working father and suffering mother.

"I'll stay." He whispered, feeling relieved that Lord Ascot was no longer alive to see the magnitude of his failure.

Lady Ascot smiled motherly. It was as if she was a different woman, but under the sweet façade, James knew her fangs were still unsheathed.

"I am glad to see you have not lost your mind." She stood up and forced James to do so as well. She was stronger than she looked. "It's an honor to have you with us, Mister Harcourt. Now go, my son and you have much to discuss and he needs your counsel. You two will raise our company higher than my husband ever thought possible, I'm sure of it."

With that, Lady Ascot dismissed him.

A servant came and took James back to Lord Ascot's office, like a guard guiding a prisoner to his cell.

Hamish was shocked when he saw James enter the study again, but he immediately understood that it was the work of his mother.

His friendliness towards him James had died down a great amount, but he kept his disposition open to the advice of the lawyer, whom he felt was cured from his father and Kingsleigh's madness.

"Welcome back, Mister Harcourt." Hamish greeted with good humor, ignoring James' despair. "Now then, shall we go back to work? I'd very much like to hear all you have planned about how to deal with our dead weight associates. Go on, I'm all ears."

James was numb. No matter what he chose, all the roads led him to the same place.

He had nowhere else to go.

He was back to the beginning, back to the man he had been.

He took breath and spoke.

The words came to him naturally.

And just like that, everything went back same as it was before.

It had been impossible after all.

"What you say is interesting, Mister Harcourt. I'd like to hear more later." Said Hamish as he sat in his father's chair. "However, there is something I'd like you to take care of first. It must be done at once, before my child is born and the Wonder returns. I won't be able to celebrate my new status as Lord Ascot until it's done. It's about a certain associate of mine, a rather peculiar one."

James stared at Hamish. He wished he could hate him, but he barely had the energy to stand on his feet, even less to waste it on someone who didn't deserve it.
"Who?" Asked James, disconcerted by the look on Hamish's eye.

"Who else could it be…." Said Hamish as if it was obvious. "Other than the loon's widow?"

Helen Kingsleigh.

What could Hamish have against her?

Was he really so narrow-minded that he couldn't separate his resentment for Alice from her mother? That resentment alone was senseless.

It had been a low blow to the Ascot's reputation for months, but it fell into oblivion after Hamish's marriage.

Why couldn't he just forget about it already?

"It all will be done legally, of course, to avoid you breaking your so much cherished code of honor. We take care of our employers in my company." Hamish said with dignity.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" Urged James.

"Make her fall." It was a simple order, and Hamish enjoyed pronouncing each word of it. "How you do it is up to you, just make sure to get it done before Alice comes back."

James remembered the kindness Helen Kingsleigh had showed him.

And now he was supposed to forget all about it?

"And how do you expect me to do it legally?" He inquired, trying to measure Hamish's knowledge of those procedures.

"You are the lawyer here, it's your job to think about it." Shrugged Hamish. "You know how to play with people's fears and make possibilities sound like facts. An aged and scared lonely widow with growing debts and daughter at sea will believe everything you tell her. I don't see anything challenging about it."

"Then do it yourself, if it's so easy."

"I'd love to, but I would be stealing your job." Hamish said with condescension. "If I do it, then why would I need to pay you at all? You might as well get fired this instant, Mister Harcourt."

Mother and son were the same.

James knew he had no way to escape the cruelty of those snakes.

He had no choice.

"What's it going to be, Mister Harcourt?"

Or had he?

"It will get done."

And he did.
Alice wished James would speak no more, but she couldn't stop him.

She suddenly felt the need to get away from him. She no longer wanted to be by his side.

"It was me, Alice." James confessed. "I was the one who made sure your mother's house and shares fell into Hamish's hands. I told her it was for the better, that there was no other way, and she believed my lies every time. She trusted me, and I took advantage of her trust."

A dormant anger boiled inside Alice's heart.

Betrayal, when it came from a friend, hurt more than all the humiliation her enemies had put her through.

"That's why you could have contradicted Hamish's legal procedure." Alice spat. She put Dinah on the seat and stood up. "Because you were the one who came up with it. My family's home, the Wonder, my mother's tranquility … you took it all away."

"Alice..." James stood up too. "Yes, it was all my doing. Hamish would never have been able to get away with it if it hadn't been for me."

"How easy you speak of it." Hissed Alice with her fists clenched. "And then what? You felt bad and decided to work with us because you were seeking your redemption? You wanted to be the knight in shining armor of those poor Kingsleigh women you tricked. How noble of you, Harcourt! We would be lost without you."

"It wasn't like that." James explained, trying to keep his voice from breaking. "I delayed the process as much as I could, hoping you would return and set things right. I did all I could to help you and your mother, Alice, I tried…"

"No, you didn't." Alice's voice woke up some of the passengers, who stared at the scene with alarm and curiosity. "And don't you dare to blame it all on me. You didn't fail because I didn't come back on time, you failed because you were a weak man."

"Alice." James reached his hand towards her.

Alice slapped it away.

"You still are."

"Alice!"

She ran away from him, away from the gossiping and judging eyes of the other passengers.

She opened a door and entered another wagon. James came after her, calling her name, not caring if they woke up the whole train in the process.

Alice wished she hadn't told her.

She wished she didn't know, because now that she did, James had become a different person in her eyes.

All the time they had spent together now seemed like a mockery. James had known the suffering he had caused to Alice and her mother, and yet he'd had the gall to keep it quiet and act as if he had cared for them.
He had pretended to be her friend, but now Alice didn't know if they had ever been close at all.

Had James told her sooner, would her anger against him had been any less fervent?

Alice quickly wondered about it, but an answer wouldn't help her piece together what had been broken.

Her resentment faded, and Alice realized that it wasn't what caused her ill feelings towards James.

She wouldn't trust him again, she couldn't.

That's what pained her.

The truth had torn apart in a few hours what secrecy had kept together for almost a year.

That's what James had brought upon them with his honesty.

Maybe, thought Alice as she reached the last wagon of the train, James should have always remained a crooked lawyer.

If he had, they never would have met.

It would have been better for them that way.
The Wonder

Morning came, dark and cold as always in the Outlands.

Time was already working outside. Spare pieces of metal surrounded him in a perfect circle.

No matter how early Tarrant rose from his sleep, he couldn't wake before him. Sometimes, he wondered if Time slept at all.

"I thought you wouldn't wake up. I don't understand the mortal fascination with sleeping, considering that's all you end up doing for eternity once your time is up." Time said him without looking at him. He was kneeling next to a sphere-shaped metal machine. He joined the pieces together at a speed only possible for Time himself.

It had taken him only an instant to assemble it, but Time insisted in perfecting even the tiniest of details before he allowed Tarrant to lay a finger on it.

A week had passed since then.

Time was no less jealous over his machine than an artist over his paintings, and he was rather finicky with the amount of help he accepted from Tarrant.

Which, much to Tarrant's despair, was little to none. At best, Time considered him a pest, but he let him stick around while he worked on the machine, as long as he didn't touch anything.

However, Time quickly grew tired of Tarrant's curious eyes gazing upon his creation, and he would then dismiss him with an uncaring wave of his hand, as if he was shooing a bug flying close to his ear. He acted annoyed, but something told Tarrant that Time found solace and satisfaction in seeing the awe his creations caused reflected on people's faces.

Tarrant dared not to say it out loud, but if the machine caused awe, it was only because of its mystical nature, not its aesthetic magnificence.

Its design was a reminiscence of the Chronosphere, though this was a much rougher work, not nearly as sophisticated as the heart of all time. The pieces were joined together in a random manner, with irregular angles and sharp ends giving a menacing aura to it.

They were all covered in rust and spoilt by wear, rather than shining in everlasting gold.

It was true that efficiency overcame the aesthetic in this case, but Tarrant more often than not wished to improve its appearance with some colorful adornments of his own invention. Or as colorful as he could make them with the decrepit resources of Iracebeth's castle and the barren Outlands.

He only wished to help.

He needed to.

If he was going to see Alice again, it also had to be something he had worked hard to accomplish, not just gifted to him by a moody, old, fussy-

"Stop staring or I'll stop working." Grunted Time with a cranky voice.

Tarrant folded his arms and turned his back on Time. He had to bit his tongue to keep his opinions unspoken.
It was the least he could do, to show Time some respect.

All in all, Time had been considerably generous. Tarrant knew he had to be grateful, even if it meant to endure Time's overbearing pickiness.

Besides, it wasn't as if Tarrant could have ever done a better job on his own.

"Yes, good morning to you too." Tarrant looked at the ground and found a small shinny gear, one of the few where rust hadn't left its mark. He picked it up and, biting his lower lip, he approached the machine with discrete steps. "I'll just put this right here. It'll look pretty, like a flower in a lady's hair."

Time gasped at the Hatter's intrusion and slapped the gear off of his hand.

"Stop, your clumsy hands will ruin it all!" Time shrieked as he pushed Tarrant away. He was no less paranoid than he would have been if Tarrant had dared to touch the Chronosphere.

Tarrant caught a glimpse of Time's wide opened sky-blue eyes behind the binoculars Tarrant had attached to his hat.

They had once been Iracebeth's treasured opera glasses, but that was one tiny piece of information Tarrant had kept from Time.

"I think you are overreacting a little, my friend." Said Tarrant as he rubbed his hand. "Maybe you need a small dose of oil."

"I'm all out of oil, and I can't have more because that Second has forsaken me." Time looked away in the opposite direction, trying to hold back the tears tickling in his eyelids. "It ran away this morning, and it never came back. But I'm not sad about it, my Seconds are free to do as they wish. Their ingratitude doesn't affect me. Ingratitude!"

"But it is in your head."

"No, I didn't imagine it. It happened." Said Time solemnly as he put a hand on his chest. "Alas, stupid Second, it will always be in my heart."

"No, I meant that it is ON your head." Tarrant pointed atop Time's hat, where the Favorite Second was already refilling the oil deposit. "Sorry, wrong preposition."

"Oh." Time spread his arms before him, and the Second jumped into them while ticking happily. "Where have you been, little trinket? You wander off like that again, and you'll be in great trouble. No, no, don't pout at me like that, it won't work. You can't always cry away your problems, that you can't."

"Maybe it wandered off because you never let it help you with anything, and watching you work it's not exactly the most entertaining thing...." Said Tarrant as he played with his thumbs.

"Are you still talking about the Second, or about yourself?" Time went back to work without granting Tarrant more attention than needed. "And I'm not here to amuse you. If that's what you want, then you should go back home, to your crazy friends. You know, back to the lazy rat and the ghastly cat with the creepy smile... Cheese or whatever his name is."

"Mally is not a rat, and Chessur is not a cheese!" Exclaimed Tarrant.

"But is he creepy?"
"Well-

"Aha! You hesitated, so that means I'm right and you're wrong. I win! Now shut up and let me work. Go be useful or useless elsewhere." Time gave no place for contradictions, and became so focused in his work that Tarrant could have yelled in his ear and still he wouldn't have moved an inch.

The Second finished filling up the hat's oil deposit and went to Tarrant immediately after, butt-heading his legs gently as it jumped around him with uncontained enthusiasm.

It certainly wasn't the most useful of the Seconds, and Tarrant often wondered how quickly the whole process would had been if it had been Wilkins helping Time instead.

But its merry nature was much welcome to Tarrant, and a much rarer find in the Outlands.

Tarrant picked it up and noticed a pink fluff lingering on the Second's back.

"Could it be?" Tarrant held the Second with one hand and searched inside his pocket with the other. He took out a shaggy, dirty feather and compared it with its match. "Borogoves... in the Outlands? Little guy, you have made an historical discovery today! I'd be much grateful if you guided me to where they are. Just thinking of all the colorful adornments I could make with their feathers sends shivers down my spine."

Tarrant began to dance, jumping from one side to the other, holding the equally happy Second close to his chest. He laughed and it ticked in unison.

Their dance was shattered by Tarrant's sudden halt. A serious frown replaced his joyful grin.

"That was annoying, and unnecessary. Annoyingly unnecessary, unnecessarily annoying." Said Time. "If you do it again, I'll summon the Pendulum and send you flying into infinity. Mark my words, Hatter."

"No, no. The borogoves will have to wait. I have to fetch some ice, my friends need it. How selfish of me!"

"Did you hear to what I said?" Time repeated, lifting his head like an offended peacock, but Tarrant passed next him as if nothing, mumbling to himself with the Second tailing him like a shadow. "How dare you ignore Time? The One, the Only, the Infinite!"

Tarrant snapped out of his thoughts and smiled.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I said-" Time started, but the Hatter walked off again, lost in thought.

"Fetch ice for them, that's what I must do!"

"Stop ignoring me, you fool!" Snapped Time. "The gall of you mortals never ceases to amaze me. And if the fruit people need the ice so desperately, they should go fetch it themselves. Keep doing them favors and they will either become useless creatures, or they'll take advantage of your kindness."

"A little solidarity never hurt anyone." Replied Tarrant.

"But much of it has." Asserted Time.

"If that's the case, then it was wrongly applied."
"I'm just giving you some advice, Hatter."

"And I thank you for it, but I don't need it."

"You know so little."

"I know enough."

"Do what you want then, since you are so wise." spat Time. "In fact, if you are so much wiser than me, then maybe you don't need my help at all."

He threw the spare pieces he was holding to the floor. They smashed against each other and resonated like the hollow ding of a bell. Steam came out of the valve of his hat, emptying half of the oil in storage.

"Why are you so upset?" Asked Tarrant, confused at Time's tantrum. The Second hid behind him, trembling and shaking without control. "I wasn't trying to offend you, Time. I'm sorry if I did, but with or without your approval, I'm still going to get some ice."

"Be my guest. You are free to do your will." said Time, still incensed. "It's not the first time my advice goes unheard."

"Uh?"

"Just leave."

Tarrant agreed to that, and he felt no remorse in leaving Time working alone with the machine. The Second accompanied him.

Time's attitude had been more childish and out of place than usual, and Tarrant wasn't in the mood to put up with it.

What did Time have against ice anyway?

Had it ever offended him in some way, by giving him a cold?

Had the fruit people ever caused offense?

Of course they hadn't.

"Fool."

Tarrant stopped and turned on his heels.

"Stop calling me that." He stated harshly.

"Then stop acting like one." Time shrugged. "Why walk all your way there if you have your Gyre-Hat?"

"It hasn't been working well. I probably damaged it when I tried to reach Upperland on my own."

Accepted Tarrant, putting a hand on his hat.

"Then fix it."

"I cannot, not without the proper materials."
"Then go get them."

"I cannot."

"Why not?"

"I'd need to go back home."

"Then go back home."

"I cannot do that, Time. I can't go back." Tarrant said, the lump in his throat deepening his voice. "Do you understand that?"

Time kept silent, his attention back at fixing the machine.

Tarrant waited, but an answer never came, so he decided it was best to leave.

A few minutes after he was gone, Time stopped working and watched from afar how Tarrant and his Second walked towards the chilling mountains.

It was a long way to walk.

Going by foot was impractical and a waste of himself, but that was none of his business. He was already helping the Hatter more than enough.

He had no time to do anything else for them.

A weight inside his pocket became heavier at this thought.

He took Alice's gift out of it.

"Fool." He gazed at the clock's cover, thinking of the paralyzed hands behind it, stiff like heart that would never beat again.

He held it gently between his hands.

"I do."

Tarrant put the bag filled with ice down and knocked the door.

No one answered.

He could hear someone weeping inside.

He took a deep breath and sighed it out with pity.

He had lost count of the number of sprouts that had wilted and faded away like ash in the wind before they had the chance to bloom. Sometimes, they rot the moment they were planted.

How many others had suffered the same fate before Tarrant had arrived?

Knowing the answer was something better left unknown, Tarrant left the bag and went outside the castle. His Schnozzless friend needed to be alone with her grief.

It was the most considerate thing he could do for her.
Once back outside, he tried to find someone in need of his help, but the fruit people were capable to carry out their daily activities on their own. Not long ago, he had killed his free time with lengthy hours of sleep, but now that he had abandoned his search for Alice in his dreams, it seemed like a pointless activity.

He knew he had something else to do. He had to see how Time was doing.

But that was the last thing he wished to do. It wouldn't be long before Tarrant couldn't hide behind a smile the indignation Time's ill treatment caused him.

He wasn't a lap dog Time could order around and treat like mud in his boots everytime he wished to, knowing that it would always return to its master with the tail between its legs.

He hadn't escaped Iracebeth's tyranny just to subjugate himself to another ruler's coercion, not even of Time himself.

Regardless of how much he was helping him.

"Tick!" The Second atop his hat demanded his attention like a bored child looking for amusment. It jumped on his hat until half of Tarrant's face was buried under it.

"Now is not a good time, little one." Tarrant explained, but the Second's ticks and jumps only become more restless. "Time never taught you manners, did he? What a surprise."

With one high final jump, the Second brought the hat down all the way to Tarrant's chin.

"Alright, alright, we'll go see Time now! Just stop, you are making me look like a hat that grew legs of its own." Said Tarrant a little angry, though the image of a walking hat made him chuckle. If such hats existed, they would become Witzend's new sensation in the blink of an eye. "For someone who lacks a language, or a mouth for that matter, you surely know how to get your point across."

"Tick."

Quicker than he would have preferred, Tarrant reached the place where the machine rested, like a forgotten monument of old.

Cracking his fingers and practicing a smile, he put his hands on his hips.

"Greetings! How is your Timeliness doing?"

Time said nothing.

He was still offended.

"Listen Time, we should put this silly fight behind us and move on. What do you say?" Said Tarrant, looking for Time at the other side of the machine. "Time? Time!"

Time wasn't there.

There was only empty space.

Tarrant's heart sunk inside his chest, and he ran around the machine as if he was competing in a Caucus race. But it didn't matter how many time he ran around the machine, he couldn't find Time.

"He left. He really left..."
His limbs went limp and hanged against his ribs like loose ropes.

The possibility of Time abandoning him had always been there, but merely as a joke Time disguised as a threat. Or so had Tarrant believed.

Regardless of his many complaints, Tarrant hadn't thought Time would abandon him for real.

Once again, Tarrant realized how little he knew Time. It didn't matter how ill or good he thought of him, all of his conclusions about Time were always incorrect. Maybe Time was too complex for him to understand, maybe he was too simple to interpret him correctly.

And now, he was gone.

"Time." Tarrant whispered, feeling how the ground under his feet crumbled down, just like his hopes.

"Yes?"

Tarrant turned around so quickly his knees almost disjointed.

Time put a disgusted expression at the sight of the Hatter's face.

"Ugh, and here I though you couldn't be uglier. Out of my way."

If he wasn't such a rude old timer, Tarrant would have hugged him.

"I thought I wouldn't see you again." Said Tarrant, with hiccups of relief altering his speech.

"Please, we didn't see each for what, two hours? You are being a crybaby, just like my Seconds. Speaking of them, where is that pesky oil can? I thought it was with you! I swear, if something happened to it..."

"Fear not, it's on my hat."

"That's not my Second, that's an ugly borogove."

The multicolored fluff ball leapt towards Time, who caught it to protect himself rather than to prevent it to hit the ground. Stranged, he ruffled the feathers until he discovered a layer of metal where skin should be.

"What is this?!"

"Yeah, I think you need to talk about your Second about its love for feathers." Tarrant cleared his throat. "Dead borogove feathers. That graveyard wasn't a pleasant sight, let me tell you. I dared not pluck a single feather off of them. Sadly, the Second seems to lack my respect for the fallen."

The Second ticked oddly, trying to imitate the speech of the borogoves.

Time put it down and gave it a small kick in its behind.

"You are not a fluffy chicken, you are a Second. Behave as such." Scolded Time with little sympathy, making the Second look down in shame.

"I don't think there are many differences between them." Added Tarrant, tapping his chin with his fingers. "Think about it, they are both cowardly, small, and have the brain the size of a nut. If it wants to be a borogove, then let it be one."
He was unable to continue when he caught sight of a cart behind Time. His body and magnificent attire had hid it well, and Tarrant's fear of Time leaving for good had prevented him from noticing it before.

With curiosity bursting in every nerve of his body, Tarrant went to inspect it. It was large enough to carry two people of his size, and it was built of the same rusted metal of the machine.

"Did you build it?" Asked Tarrant, too surprised to ask anything but the obvious.

"No, it built itself." Time answered, slapping his forehead and rolling his eyes. His ego grew when not even his jest managed to diminish Tarrant's awe, and he began to gesture and explain as if he was giving a presentation for an amazed multitude. "Behold the Kalamazoo, Underland's best pump trolley! Fast as an arrow and light as a feather. Look at it and realize how insignificant you are in its presence."

"It's quite nice, but I wouldn't go that far..."

"I thought of its name myself. It took me only one Second." Time grinned without listening to the Hatter.

"It's a good name, it fits it perfectly." Tarrant granted, clapping.

Time accepted the applause with royal condesendance and bowed, as if he had given the greatest speech in the story of Underland.

"It's for the fruit people to use. Now you can stop being their errand boy, Hatter." Said Time with uncommon indifference. "First, I must finish building the rails, of course. It should be fast, it's not as if there are many places one would like to explore in the Outlands..."

"Time." Taarrant said humbly. It was easy to forget Time was more than his conceit revealed at first sight. "Thank you. You have no idea how much it will help them. They won't forget that."

"They will, as everyone always does." Said Time with sudden sourness. "But I do not care about their gratefulness. And I don't want to hear any complaints about why I didn't build it earlier. I very much like to finish one project before I start another."

Time's smile widened as Tarrant seemed to understand the true weight of his words.

Tarrant had to pinch his arm to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

"It's done?" He asked.

"It's done." Time answered.

Tarrant stood next to the machine and touched it slowly and with caution, as if he was dealing with a hungry flame. Time didn't intervene.

The cutting touch of the machine felt as soft as petals on Tarrant's palms.

"I never thought it would be impossible." Tarrant said with a thread of voice. "But now that it's happened, I can't believe it was possible after all."

"Typical of mortals." Time said. "You always chase after dreams you think are out of your reach. You know no better way to spend the time you are given."

"We must seem rather foolish to you."
"It's only natural. I've always been aware of my purpose and the extent of my power, and act accordingly to them. Mortals are different. You know neither until you have grown and changed, but you only get the motivation to do so if you have some dream to guide you. I do not understand it, but I admire the concept."

"It's not only because of dreams. If we change and grow, it's also because of you."

"Are you reproaching me, Hatter?"

"Did it sound as such?"

"No."

"Then why ask me at all?"

Time said nothing and stood next to Tarrant, his arms folded and with the Second sitting on his shoulder.

They admired the machine in silence for a while, as noon began to overtake the world.

"It needs a name." Time spoke. "And luckily for you, I've already thought of one. We shall name it **Axis Y**!"

"No." Said Tarrant gently but with determination.

"What do you mean by 'no'?" Inquired Time, but he recovered immediately and came up with multiple other names of varied nature for the machine, but were all rejected by Tarrant. "Then you name it, Hatter-namer-of-all."

"Wonder."

"No, I want you to tell me."

"That's its name." Repeated Tarrant. "**Wonder.**"

Time took off his hat off, leaving his eyes uncovered for the hatter to see the shock in them. The Second stared silently at its master, and gave him an affectionate bump that brought Time back to his senses.

"Then..." Time said, holding his hat in one hand and patting the Second with the other. "**Wonder** it is."

Without further warning, Tarrant threw himself at Time and embraced him.

"Let go of me, you loon! I'll summon the Pendulum!" Shrieked Time as he struggled to get Tarrant off.

"I will, but first, we celebrate." Tarrant announced with a hysterical voice, and began to dance and jump around, dragging Time along in his frenzied waltz. "Let us dance. Even though we cannot hear the music, let us dance!"

"You'll regret every second of this, I swear." Warned Time, though the threat sounded as menacing as the growl of a pup.

"I don't regret a Second of my entire life. Only fools do, and I'm mad, not a fool!"
Their danced ravaged the Outlands' perpetual gloom.

"I'm mad, not a fool."

The grandfather clock's hands ticked the seconds away, as indifferent of Underland's plight as they have always been.

Mirana didn't blame it. It was only a machine, and it didn't know better than to do what it was meant to.

Was it also the case with the entity dwelling inside it? She had never been sure.

For the clock was more than the eye perceived.

It was also the entrance of a castle. It lacked the embrace of the chains that had kept anyone from going in for countless of years.

And above all, kept him from going out.

Surrounded by pitchblack darkness, she created a small white flame with a snap of her fingers.

The light revealed the clock in its true form. At day, it was a remarkable piece of Underland's history, a part of the tradition passed down for generations in the royal bloodline.

At night, it transformed into a mystery that scared away all idle curiosity of discovering whatever secrets it may hold.

When Mirana touched it, the memories of her childhood fears of the clock reopened, like a bad wound that had failed to scar.

She stepped back, the coldness of the clock still lingering in her fingers. It was the same brisk feeling that had taken over her body in Time's domain, as she dragged her sister away from the deathly rust.

The people of Underland could easily blame Time for that disaster, but it was simply because they ignored the role their beloved Queen had played in the background.

She had taken a great risk, and had put in danger more than her father would have approved. The sole thought of sending someone to get the Chronosphere betrayed the most basic teachings King Oleron had entrusted to his daughters.

But Mirana had to do it.

There had been no other way to save Tarrant's life.

He was her friend, and her savior.

She wasn't proud, but she didn't regret it either. She knew better than no one that a Queen's duty asks for the boldest of actions in desperate situations, even if most of times, the aftermath is hardly better than the previous chaos.

And Underland was living in a fragile peace that would shatter at the gentlest touch. She had promised her people a new age, but now, she feared it would be but the prelude of dark times.

Trying to rule by Iracebeth's side was no harder than facing a Jabberwocky bare-handed.
She had managed to keep the peace, but it was coming apart right in front of her eyes.

She needed his counsel, for he was as dangerous as wise, and knew Iracebeth in many ways the rest didn't. Perhaps he could shed some light in the whole matter and help her set things right.

But asking for his help could bring only more problems in the future. Her father had known this well.

And yet, there she was, with her hands again on the clock’s door.

Then it happened. She began to open it.

The hinges creaked, and to Mirana, it sounded like the echo of his ancestor's tradition falling apart like a destroyed castle.

"Your Majesty?" said a squealing voice from outside the room.

The door slammed closed at the departure of Mirana's hand.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes, Mally. I'll be out in a moment." Said Mirana, stepping back from the clock.

"We couldn't find him in the Snud. His family asks us to look elsewhere, and some of them had offered to join us in our quest." Informed the dormouse.

"The Hightopp clan should think of nothing more than the making of my sister's crown." Stated Mirana. A lot depended on that crown, Mirana knew.

If it went wrong, then Underland might as well have rusted for eternity when it could.

"They want to speak with you at once. Zanik is waiting for you at the throne hall."

Mirana sighed. Tarrant's disappearance had come in the least convenient of times.

"Please, your Majesty." Plead Mally, with the exhaustion of her quest for the Hatter sneaking into her voice. "Only you can set things right."

Mirana felt the burden of the world on her shoulders, and it felt good.

It reminded her of the occasions she hadn't been crushed by it. Kings and Queens of the past had survived harder trials without asking Time for his help.

And she too had had her generous ration of hardships.

She would survive once again, her entire kingdom would prevail.

With a wave of her hands, she summoned a flock of paper birds that joined together around the clock. She gestured again, and they transformed into chains.

The whole adventure for the Chronosphere had opened new paths for the fate of Underland's relationship with Time, but it had also been a humbling experience for Mirana.

Her fear for Time was now a fear for the sake of Time. He had to live, even if it doomed him to a confined existence. Now she saw that the wisdom of the ancients was more transcendent than ever before.
Never again would she allow her desperation to cloud her mind to the point of considering Time an ally.

That was her last word.

The white fire extinguished as she exited the room. Mally welcomed her with a nervous shake of her whiskers.

"Well then, shall we meet Mister Hightopp?" Mirana said, with the kind disposition of her reputation.

"Did something happen?" Mally asked, not out of thirsty curiosity, but out of concern.

Mirana smiled at the perceptive mouse and kneeled next to her, offering Mally her hand. The dormouse jumped into her hand and climbed up to her shoulder.

"Don't worry Mally, everything will get back to normal." Mirana promised just as Iracebeth crossed her path, glaring at her sister with flaring eyes. "I'll make sure of that."

"I know you will, and I'll stand by your side." Mally said, looking with bold resentment at Iracebeth, who left a trace of her rage across her path. "My one true Queen."
Alice came to a dead end.
The door that gave access to the cargo wagon was her last escape, but it wouldn't budge.

"Alice."

A treacherous tear burn its way down her cheek. Alice scratched it away with undisguised anger, promising herself she wouldn't shed one more.

"Go away." She looked at the door instead of James, as if her eyes had been weaved to it with an invisible thread.

"If you would just listen to me."

"But I just did, didn't I? And look where it left us." Alice would rather earth to swallow her than letting James see how much she struggled to keep herself together. "Once was enough. We have nothing more to say to each other."

"Then tell me what should I do. If there's a way I can make it up to you-"

"What about my mother? Can you make it up to her?" A fierceness like Alice hadn't felt ever since the death of her father ignited every bone in her body. "All the stress your lies caused her..."

James stepped back, unsure if it was fear or the pain Alice's words inflicted what drove him away from her.

"Can you repay the toll it took on her health?" Alice dug her nails into her palms until they turned white. "Can you, James?"

"I-"

"Can you?"

"She knows everything."

Alice blinked in disbelief, wincing no less than she had done when the Jabberwocky had managed to claw and burn her skin during their fated encounter.

She managed to keep calm when she considered the ridiculousness of the statement.

Helen Kingsleigh was a kind and gentle woman, but her good heart wouldn't mellow her pride if the offense was too insulting to forgive with a mere apology.

That was the sort of person her mother was, and Alice knew it better than no one.

The fact that James was trying to fool her with such a pathetic lie was as laughable as insolent.

"Liar."

"No! I told her everything, I swear. I told her right after I quit working for the Ascot and went to her to let me join your company."
Why did he have to insist with that charade? It only made Alice's resentment grow fiercer.

Her mother couldn't possibly have known what James had done. She wouldn't have forgiven him so easily.

What reason would she have had to do so?

Their new company could have fared well without a lawyer for a year or more, and the crew had been in no urgent need of new recruits, since all of the original members of the Wonder had followed their captain to her new ship.

Alice had always thought James' recruitment was her mother's first step in getting even with the Ascot.

That way, not only she would break free from their oppression with her head held high, but she also would snatch from them one of their most valuable assets: their lawyer.

Even then, Helen wouldn't have overlooked James' fault just for the sake of retribution.

It would have taken a superior motive.

But her mother hadn't had one. Alice knew that, and the thought soothed her.

Why then, was her heart thumping and her mouth dry?

"I didn't hide anything from her. Even after knowing what I had done, she forgave me." James' voice could barely keep the pace of his rushed words. "I didn't deserve it, I know that well, just as I know that I can't undo the harm I caused her... the harm that I caused all your family. I'm sorry, Alice."

Alice felt off balance.

She believed him. For a dreadful second, she believed him in the same manner she had done before.

But to trust him was a mistake.

James knew her well, and was using this knowledge to lure Alice into granting him forgiveness.

How sad for him that Alice was not a callow girl that would fall into his trap so easily.

Her years as a captain and as a merchant had taught her of the dangers of unmeasured naivety.

"My mother may have forgiven you, but that doesn't mean I have to." Alice said without emotion.

"Or that I will."

She heard how James took breath to speak, but he said nothing.

She wondered if it was because he didn't want to, or because he couldn't.

"Alice." James finally said, his voice broken and void. "Is there really nothing I can do?"

"Leave." Alice answered, her anger appeased but far from gone. "You told me you would understand if I decided not to speak to you again. Please, keep your word and leave."

She expected to hear more of his arguments, more of his futile attempts to convince her.

James betrayed her expectations, and he could simply breathe a sunken laugh.
"I did say that." He said, unashamed that Alice could hear the tears she stubbornly refused to see. "It's just one of the many things I wish I could go back and undo. But I guess I'm wishing upon the impossible, am I not?"

Quietly and slowly, he left. The only sounds he made were the echo of his steps and the rustling of the wagon's door when he shut it closed behind him.

Once he was gone, the pain that Alice had kept guarded broke when it came together with the shame of having been fooled for so long and so well.

The stab inflicted to her pride was no less damaging than the acknowledgement of having lost her friend for good. She would still interact with him, but only as her employer and acquaintance.

The rest of James was gone.

Alice cried in silence, incapable to keep the promise she had made to herself.

It happened against her will.

She cried not only because of James, but also because of her mother.

All the memories of the times Helen had made everything in her power for James and Alice to be together rushed to Alice's mind as unwelcome as her tears.

Inviting him to dine and have tea time with them almost every day, suggesting Alice to train James in the sailor's ways when any other member of the crew could have done so, Helen's unusual soft treating of James, allowing him to go together with Alice to Peking in her place…

Alice thought it all had been her mother's way for her to open up to James. A hard feat to accomplish, considering James' past relationship with the Ascot and Alice's temperament.

Yet, Alice had done so.

But now, she knew her mother's plans went beyond forming a loyal friendship between her daughter and the ex-lawyer.

Alice discovered how gullible she still was, and how little her mother had truly changed.

Back to the day in the Ascot manor, Helen had expressed her relief of Alice not marrying Hamish.

She never expressed her latent fear of Alice never marrying at all.

And then James, the repentant man whom Lord Ascot had trusted and who she had come to appreciate, had come to her like a prodigal son in need.

It was too good of an opportunity to let it go to waste, her mother should have thought.

Alice punched the door, peeling the skin off her knuckles.

She was in the other side of the world, but some things never changed.

That was a truth that not time or space could alter.

But if they couldn't, then Alice would.

She would prove everyone how much.
Grasping tightly to this thought, Alice rubbed her cheeks dry.

Nothing was ever accomplished with tears.

It was time she remembered it for good.

Soon, it all went to back to its previous calmness.

The passengers who had witnessed the argument were deep asleep again, and those who were never disturbed by it remained lost in their dreams.

Alice passed unnoticed by them all. She had no desire to return to her seat, but once her anger died down, exhaustion took its place with double intensity. It came together with a headache that made Alice's ears ring.

She thought of delaying her unavoidable reencounter with James, but quickly she decided not to let their falling out have influence over her actions. All she needed to do was to ignore him the same way she ignored her shadow or a nameless stranger in the street.

As hard as it would be at first, she wouldn't change her mind.

The wagon was filled with the gentle murmur of the snoring passengers and lighted dimly with the moonlight. Alice had to use her hands and memory to find her way back to her seat, trying not to trip over the numerous luggage lying on the floor.

She reached her destination with a reluctant heart, but she didn't find James.

Relief overcame her, though a voice in the back of her mind reminded Alice she was merely delaying the meeting.

It mattered little.

Morning would come soon, and so would James.

Until then, Alice would get the rest she deserved.

Hopefully, she thought as she rested her back against the seat and closed her eyes, she would have a dreamless sleep. One numb and unexciting, but recovering.

One where the disappointment of wandering in the Palace of Dreams without finding him wouldn't spoil the healing effect of her rest.

Her mind began to drift away from the world into the sea of dreams. Soon she would be exploring those magical waters, free from the lies and burdens thrust upon her by people she thought she could trust.

Soon…

"Alice."

"Tarrant?"

"Alice."

She opened her eyes.
The voice came from the world outside her dreams.

She bobbed her head and looked around.

James' name almost escaped from her lips, but to pronounce it would be a waste of her breath.

If it was really him, then he would show himself at one moment or another.

"Alice."

Her name came from behind her, from the same drunken man who hadn't opened his eyes ever since the train departed.

His eyes, unlike his mouth, were still closed.

"Alice."

The whisper came now in the form of a female voice.

Alice turned around again, agitated and ready to demand an explanation.

Two glittering green eyes stole Alice's attention with the subtlety a thief sneaks his hand into a pocket without being noticed. In the ominous darkness, they shun like emeralds against the sunlight.

"Dinah."

Alice was happy to see that her affection for the kitten remained unchanged. With great concern and with the sudden need to hold the kitten in her arms, Alice silently made her way towards Dinah, taking great caution in not waking the woman whose shoulder the cat had mistaken for a bed.

"It's alright, just come here." Said Alice as she tried to seize Dinah, but it escaped her grasp gracefully, leaving only a faint trace of its silky pelt on Alice's finger tips.

Its paws landed soundlessly on the floor, with a common feline elegance that reminded Alice of Chessur.

Dinah slowly looked at her before dashing towards the wagon's door.

Alice went after her without hesitating, though she knew the kitten had nowhere to run. She had closed the door, and if it was already difficult for a human to open it, a cat would have no chance against it.

"Alice." Muttered a young boy with his head resting on his mother's arm.

Alice froze on spot. Her bewilderment grew when she heard her name chanted once more.

The sleeping chorus was formed by the people whom Dinah had passed next by.

With her heart racing, Alice could only look at Dinah again, and the kitten stared back.

A blue fluoresce danced inside its eyes like trapped smoke. Alice had felt that hypnotic sensation before, in Mirana's castle.

It was the same mesmerizing aura of…

"Alice!" Shouted in dreams an aged man, the nearest person to Dinah. In the same loud voice, he
said something in his native language.

His scream was muffled by the simultaneous slam of the wagon's door.

Dinah escaped through it, causing the same effect on the passengers of the other wagon along her way.

Alice followed its lead impulsively, without having any reason to do so other than the intuitive feeling that she had to, as if the words the old woman had said had been carved deep inside her mind.

Translated, they had a simple but unmistakable meaning:

*Come to me.*

Alice followed Dinah through all the wagons she had been before, immersed in a state where her body and mind were still hers to control, but with both having one single objective to fulfill.

*Come to me.*

When the calling came to an end and Alice snapped out of the enchanted trance, she was standing in front of her family's grandfather's clock.

On top of it, Dinah looked at her with fear, meowing desperately for help as if it had climbed a tree too tall.

Alice ignored her kitten's cry for help, as she was too confused and unsettled about what had happened to know where she was, even less what to do. The headache had transformed into a beating migraine.

After a few minutes of recovering, Alice was able to sort her thoughts out.

She looked behind her, and saw the door of the cargo wagon was open.

She was inside.

If someone saw her, no doubt they would accuse her of robbery, or at the very least, of breaking all of the train's rules of safety.

She had to get out of there.

Once outside, she would think about what had happened, and she would try to make some sense out of it if she could.

Though maybe, she thought, there had not been no sense in it at all.

A high-pitched meow brought her completely back to her senses, and this time, Alice attended immediately to Dinah's call.

The kitten had a terrified expression in its eyes now free of the intruding blue. They were wide open, with the pupils dilated to the point where black had engulfed most of the green. Alice needn't see to know Dinah was trembling.

Gently, Alice reached her hands as closely as she could towards the cat, but she couldn't reach it. The clock was too high.
"Dinah." Said Alice, trying to catch the cat's attention with a quick movement of her fingers. "It's okay, come here."

Dinah cowered back and hissed, clawing erratically, too panicked to recognize its master's voice.

"Come on." Whispered Alice, standing on her toes and stretching her arms as far as she could. "I'll catch you. Don't worry, it'll all be alright."

The grandfather clock marked the hour thrice, the pendulum swinging more chaotically than usual.

Then it happened.

The wagon's door was slammed shut, and before Alice could react, the train's whistle cried in a note so high that she swore it could be heard all the way back to London.

One second later, the train began to move again, at a speed unexpected and unnatural for such machine, despite how advance its engines could be. It was as if it could cut through air and the rails below it would disintegrate.

The violent change of speed pushed Alice forward to the clock. She crashed against it, hitting her forehead with the crystal that guarded the frenzied pendulum.

Around her, piles of carefully accommodated boxes fell apart like an avalanche, mixing in the air and floor with rolls of silks of endless colors. Ceramic objects and glass figures were the first victims to succumb to the surrounding chaos, and the shattered remnants danced aimlessly in the wagon like a cyclone.

Alice held on tightly to the grandfather clock, which heaviness transformed it into the only pillar that didn't yield to the train's maddened ride. Alice opened her eyes, but decided to keep them guarded behind her forearm after a lost shard of glass cut her above the eyebrow.

Her attempts to reach the door, though multiple and brave, were all in vain. The force of that speed couldn't be matched by sheer strong will.

Dinah. The swift memory of her kitten pierced Alice's heart, but there was nothing she could do.

She, together with the rest of the passengers, were now prisoners of the frenzied train, and that wouldn't change until it decided to-

Stop. Out of nowhere, as randomly as it had started to move, the train stopped. Metal clanked, and the sound of its destruction was the last thing Alice heard before she was propelled to the left like a cannonball flying across a battlefield.

Her arm received most of the impact, and it left a burning sensation all the way down from her shoulder to her fingertips. The incoming pain was dulled by the need to survive, which reached its high point when Alice felt how gravity dragged her down again.

She managed to grab the edge of a broken window, saving herself from the pit of sharp broken objects that had gathered in the wagon's lower end.

Along with them, there was also the grandfather clock, damaged beyond repair and with the fractured pendulum's door open.

Alice' hands, numb and calloused from holding the clock with so much strength, would let go at any second.
The realization came to her mind naturally.

I'm hanging.

The whole wagon was hanging down, away from the rails that kept it connected to the safe ground.

Then, like a hushing whisper, she heard the flow of water coming from afar and below.

A river.

At its monstrous speed, the train had already reached the bridge that marked halfway through towards Pekin.

Once crossed, the train would take one hour or less to reach the station. But now, there was the chance that the train would never arrive at all, not if it fell down to the river wagon by wagon.

And the wagon that would fall first would be hers.

No.

Alice wouldn't accept that fate. She still had much to do, too many people depending on her.

She had not the time or the right to go just yet.

She moved her free arm towards the door, hoping desperately to reach it.

One way or the other, she was determined to escape. She had survived pirate attacks, storms, the Jabberwocky, Time's end, everyone's expectations of her, Tarrant's absence, her father's loss and so much more.

No.

She would get through it. She had survived the impossible before, and she would survive it once more.

"Alice!" Shouted a male voice from above.

"James?"

Her own voice was muffled by the thunderous sound of the wagon's buffer breaking. Her whole world began to fall down along with her and the wagon.

Her hand let go of the window's edge without an effort, as if Alice's body had accepted the fate her mind still refused to embrace.

She was falling to her imminent demise.

Alice understood it, and realized that just like there had been nothing she could have done to save Dinah before, there was nothing she could do to save herself now.

She fell and fell.

She closed her eyes before she crashed against the grandfather clock again, expecting to feel the definite blow to her body that would be followed by the suffocating waters.

Instead, she felt nothing. The world around her became pitch black.
Alice.

She was still falling.

Or maybe, she had already met her end, and she would continue to fall down for all eternity, as if she was trapped in an everlasting loop.

*Come to me.*

An endless rabbit hole.

*Come back.*
Thank you all for your comments, kudos and for reading! It makes me happy to know you are enjoying the story :) 
Hope you like this new chapter.

Tarrant had just entered The Wonder when the thought came to him again. It was a sweet expectation embittered by a harsh truth.

He would see Alice soon.

He would leave Underland for good.

When those two realizations fused, they became a humming voice that dragged him back to his home, to his family and friends.

He was leaving them all behind, lured away from them by his desire to be again with the woman he cherished.

That was his prime motivation, of that he had no doubt, but not his only one. Helping the fruit people and dealing with Time had kept Tarrant's mind from dwelling on the matter for long, but now that he was at the brink of accomplishing what he desired, he could no longer hide behind those walls.

He was fleeing.

A nobler man would have put aside his selfish wishes and fears and return to his parents, siblings, grandfather and nephew.

Tarrant longed for them all, but Bim above everyone else. The lad still believed his mother was lost but alive, and Tarrant would leave without revealing Poomally's true fate to him.

He would sacrifice any amount of seconds of his vital clock in exchange for a fleeting instant to tell his nephew the truth, but he knew Time would never agree to a deal of that nature.

It was but one of the many matters he would leave unfulfilled in Underland.

He faltered, with the images of the people he loved surging in his mind with a clarity that almost tricked his eyes into believing they were real. It wasn't too late to give up this madness and go back home. The opportunity was at hand, he only needed to grasp it.

Tarrant clenched his fists around the lever in front of him. Rust left its mark on his palms. It was a dust of a crimson, bloody shade.

Like an ebb after a storm, his thoughts settled.

His hands were full, and he could grasp nothing more. His resolution, though brittle, remained unchanged.
Tarrant had not time for second thoughts.

Maybe later, but not now.

He would see Alice soon, and that's what truly mattered. He had to believe that.

He had to…

"Hatter!" Time punched the machine with enough strength to make it tremble. "Stop staring into a distance only you can see and listen. Whatever you are thinking can't be more important than what I'm saying."

"Uhm." Tarrant looked to the right and bit his tongue. "What?"

"I don't believe this." Time rubbed his temples as if he was trying to appease a migraine. "Why did I agree to help a fool like you? Why?"

"Well, you know what they say, only a fool helps another fool."

"It was a rhetorical question! And who is this they exactly? They always say everything, but has anyone ever met this they?"

"…"

"Hatter, I asked you a question."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't notice your rhetorical mood was over." Said Tarrant, so casually that Time became a little offended. "Mmm, I can't say who they are, but I can tell who they are not. They are not one, so they can't also be no one. If that's true, then we can say that they aren't nobody."

Time glared at Tarrant, who had a proud finger raised up in the air.

"I can surely say that this is the most ridiculous discussion I've had in my eternal existence." Sighed Time, wondering why they were pondering in matters so trivial to begin with. "Even my Seconds wouldn't speak such nonsense, and all they say is tick and tock."

"Speak for yourself. I liked our conversation, even if it just wasted time…you." Tarrant shrugged. "Because you know what they say, time you enjoyed wasting is not time- "

"Enough! I don't want to hear more of they and their smug little sayings. I have more important things to worry about, like getting you back to that kindergartner." Snapped Time, his patience running short. "Once this fool's errand is over, I must go back to my castle. I just hope Wilkins was able to keep the Seconds under control, because the last thing I want is to clean whatever mess they made in my absence. They are lost without me, I tell you."

Tarrant breathed a laugh too faint for Time to hear.

"I'm sure they are." He quipped in a low voice, though his taint was free of malice.

Time stepped away. He formed a perfect square with his fingers and inspected the area through it, gazing occasionally at the sky. He was so immersed in his calculations that Tarrant dared not interrupt him. He waited inside The Wonder, still and silent like a statue.

To Time, it looked as if Tarrant was just pleasantly hanging around and doing nothing, but he was making great effort to keep his thoughts from drifting back to his family and friends again. He didn't know how many times he could fight against the temptation of going back home before he yielded to
"Tick!"

A small pink puff was trying to sneak into the machine like a mouse a little too fat to fit inside a hole. Tarrant crouched down and put a hand on top the feather-covered Second.

"Good timing, as always." He laughed. The Second replied in a happy babbler and his attempts to enter the machine became more relentless.

Had it not been for Tarrant's hand holding it back, it would have succeeded. With a twinge of sadness, Tarrant pushed the Second down until it fell back to the floor and rolled away from The Wonder.

The Second recovered and shook its feathers. It charged again towards the machine, its determination not having diminished one bit.

"No." Tarrant ordered, not harshly but with a severity that had a touch of his father's voice on it. For a moment, it was hard for him to believe his father wasn't talking from somewhere nearby.

The Second stopped and stood still next to the machine like a pup confused by its master's orders.

Tarrant wanted to pick it up and assure it everything was alright and that he would return soon, but he knew there was no point in tricking the Second with comforting lies.

"No, little one." Tarrant shook his head and raised his palm. "To where I'm going you can't follow."

"Tick?" The second bobbed its head to one side until it touched the ground.

"You must stay." Tarrant wondered if the Second understood what he was saying at all. "You know you must."

The green light in the Second's eyes flickered. Then, it dropped flat to the floor. Oil surrounded him and turned its feathers black.

Tarrant tried to cheer it up, but the Second seemed deafened to his call. It laid there like melting puddle until Time returned.

"What's the matter with you now?" Time scooped the Second in his hands. He shook it in all directions, but the Second remained as stiff and unresponsive as a rag doll. "Foolish trinket."

Very gently, Time put the Second back on the ground and wiped the oil dripping from his gloves.

"Great, just what I needed." He scoffed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset it." Tarrant sighed, regretting not having the chance to wish his small friend a memorable Fairfarren and leaving him in such a pathetic state instead.

"Don't mind it, the Seconds are too dramatic for their own good. It's just one of their many flaws." The little sympathy Time offered stung Tarrant, but he had grown too used to his indifference for it to hurt him more than it should. "I'll get over it sooner or later, whether he wants it or not."

Had he been in a sunnier mood, Tarrant would have teased Time by asking him if that meant time healed all wounds.
Thackery and Mally would have loved the jest, and his brother Pimlick would have enjoyed it too.

His father would have forced himself to smile, if only to indulge his son. His mother and sister would have chuckled so softly that their voices would have passed unheard.

His grandfather and nephew would have…

"It's all ready." Time announced. "Hatter?"

"It's nothing." Tarrant rubbed his eyes.

"Are you crying too?" Time asked, honestly confused. "Why? Isn't this what you wanted?"

"It is."

"I don't believe that, not when I see how much it pains you." Time stared at him as if he was a puzzle to be solved. "If leaving makes you so miserable, then why leave at all? Stay. It's as easy as that."

"It's not." Muttered Tarrant. "You wouldn't understand."

Time's patronizing confusion transformed into a repulsed bewilderment.

"You are right. Sometimes, I don't understand you mortals." He said, more to himself than to Tarrant. "I truly don't. But enough wasting me with these banal matters and your tears. I'll ask you again: do you want to leave or not?"

"I do." Tarrant said without hesitation, shocked at the swiftness of his answer and how much he feared to let his opportunity to see Alice go to waste. It felt like a slight betrayal to his family and friends, and he hoped they could forgive him one day.

"Then stop crying and mean what you say. Otherwise, this won't work." Sentenced Time. "And if we fail because of your fecklessness, do not expect me to help you ever again. Are we clear?"

Tarrant nodded, and Time gave him no quarter to go back on his word.

"Then let's us begin." Time cracked his fingers and neck, with a small blow of steam accompanying the clanking of his gears. He closed his eyes and joined his hands together on his chest, as if immersed in deep meditation.

Before anything could happen, an anxious Tarrant raised his voice to catch his attention.

"Wait! Aren't you supposed to teach me how to handle The Wonder first?" He urged, sweat shining in his forehead and his heartbeats visible on his temples. "A manual, a drawing, a riddle... anything that might give me a clue of how it works!"

Time frowned at the uncalled interruption at first, but in the blink of an eye, he started to laugh until his belly and sides hurt.

"Are you serious?" He asked as he wiped tears of laughter from his eyelids. "You really thought you'd be handling it? Please, you can't even handle your own emotions, even less something as sophisticated as my wonderful machine!"

Tarrant's blood began to boil.

"Then what is this lever for? Just another waste of yourself and space?"
"That, you blabbering oaf, is what will keep you from falling into an endless space-drift on your way up. As long as you don't let go of it, obviously. So I suggest you to hold on tight to it, because there's much more than your life at risk." Time face's became somber. "Should you fall, you will be trapped in an endless fate worse than death. Don't forget it."

Tarrant's mouth dried. He scratched his forehead with his knuckles.

"I really wish you had told me that sooner, you know."

"Why? Are you too scared to proceed now that I have?"

"Not at all, but I would have liked some time to prepare for it. At least mentally."

"It would have been in vain. You'll discover if you can survive when the moment comes." Time warned. "Think of whatever that may strengthen your determination. You still can fail, but it is also more likely that you won't."

"I understand." Tarrant took Time's words to heart and kept Alice's memory in his mind like a treasure that could be lost at the slightest moment of doubt. "Let us hope Space doesn't get angry at us for this transgression."

"Nonsense." Time refuted in the same manner a teacher dismisses a foolish claim of his student.

"Space is but a part of Time."

Smugly, Time was again ready to begin. But once more, Tarrant importuned him with his meddling.

"Time."

"What?"

"I just want you to know." Tarrant humbled his voice at the same level he did whenever he spoke to Mirana. "Well, in these last days we were at each other's throats most of the time, we fought over the silliest of things, and I don't think you will ever stop being a rude, pompous old timer…"

"You were doing well until the insults, Hatter."

"It's just me digressing, an old habit of mine. I guess what I really want to say is… "Tarrant cleared his throat and stretched his arm through one of the machine's holes, offering his hand to Time.

"Thank you, my friend."

Time said nothing, did nothing. It wasn't until Tarrant began to retract his hand back inside The Wonder that he felt Time reciprocate the handshake with faked reluctance.

"There. Are you happy now?" Time asked, shaking his hand in an exaggerated manner. "You are annoying, but apparently that's a requisite in the mortal's friendship code. What a folly. You mortals and your weird perceptions never cease to confuse me."

Tarrant grinned at him, and Time almost found himself doing the same.

"Fairfarren, Time."

"Auf Wiedersehen, Hatter." Time nooded. "Now, I hope you don't have any more of your inopportune interruptions or petitions under your sleeve, have you?"

"I do."
"Wait! It was all rhetorical question. RHETORICAL!"

"Just a couple of things that won't take much of yourself." Reassured Tarrant. "First, if you see the Schnozzless, give her my thanks. She's been so busy ever since you gave her the pump cart that I had no chance to bid her farewell. I wish I could repay all she did for me with something more than words, but since I can't, please be sure to give her my gratitude."

"Am I your messenger now?" Inquired Time with indignation.

"And secondly, something much more important." Tarrant bowed his head and held Time's hand with more strength. "Tell my nephew of his mother's death, Time. Tell Bim. Please, he needs to know. If you can't do the first, then promise me that this you will."

"Hatter- "

"Please."

"You ask too much." Declared Time, getting free from Tarrant's grip and keeping his distance from The Wonder. He almost tripped over the Second, and kicked it out of his way. "I have to return to my castle to see if everything is in order. That's my one and only priority. Once everything is settled, and if I find enough motivation to come back here, … then we'll see."

It wasn't a comforting answer, but Tarrant knew it was the best offer Time would give him. There was nothing more he could do other than putting his trust in Time. Worrying about it would amount to nothing. Counting on Time had always been a risky bet better left in the hands of luck and destiny.

"Be ready, Hatter." A sky blue energy surrounded Time like a cape. He canalized it in his hands resting in the center of his chest, and with snap of his fingers, he released it in the form of an incorporeal, exploding wave that altered continuum and reality for a moment too short to understand. "Come, Pendulum."

The energy passed through Tarrant's body without touching him, but it still stole all the air in his lungs and the strength of his legs.

His movements slowed down to the point where Tarrant could no longer tell if he was moving or frozen in time, or in a bizarre point in between.

The world went back to its original course with a subtlety that seemed out of place.

Tarrant took a deep breath and felt how his blood rushed through his body like a river, giving him back the sensation of being one with Underland's reality.

He was about to ask Time for an explanation when he caught a golden glimpse behind him with the corner of his eye. He looked over his shoulder and saw the gigantic bob of a pendulum retracting slowly from the machine, preparing to swing and crash against it once it reached its maximum altitude.

Tarrant looked up with his mouth open. His eyes wandered off towards the pendulum's rod. He inspected it from start to end, only to discover that the whole pendulum was suspended in thin air, with no other support or force to hold it in its place other than Time's power and concentration.

"Focus, Hatter. Feebleness of mind and body are not allowed anymore." Urged Time with a calmness tainted by exhaustion. "Time transcends space, and you may too if your will is strong enough."
The pendulum's bob halted in midair.

Tarrant felt as if his heart would explode in his throat. The waiting worsened his nerves.

The Pendulum's strike would be mightier than the blow of a hammer against an anvil. It still hadn't happened, and yet, he already knew.

The rusted metal lever lacerated the flesh of his palms. Tarrant closed his eyes. He could only wish the machine wouldn't break into pieces at the Pendulum's touch.

Doubts and fears overflowed in his mind, but Alice's memory dispersed them just like darkness fades in the presence of light.

*My Alice.*

It was the last thought Tarrant kept in his heart before the Pendulum swung swiftly, as if it was marking the hour of the whole universe. The hit came as Tarrant had expected.

The machine went up at a speed that would make a shooting star turn green with envy. Air crashed against Tarrant's face like a thousand cuts. It made it impossible for him to open his eyes, regardless of how much he wished to.

Deep down, the regret of his inability to take one last glance of his home world almost made him waver, but Alice guarded him from any surging doubts.

*My Alice.*

Tarrant smiled.

He had nothing to fear.

Once he opened his eyes again, she would be the first thing he saw.

He was sure of that.

She was waiting for him at the end of his journey.

All he had to do was to wait and believe as *The Wonder* took him up, and up, and up and...

---

Patience, Time told himself.

There was no margin of error.

The Hatter was already halfway through. All that was left to do was to give *The Wonder* one final Pendulum's strike when it reached Underland's highest point.

Time needn't see the machine to know its position. He could feel the presence of his own invention like a distant call muffled by distance, but not silenced in its totality.

*Intuition*, mortals would call it.

For Time, it was as natural as existing.

"There!" *The Wonder* was close to its goal.

He gathered his energy once more and summoned the Pendulum to a new position, far away from
him and closer to the machine.

It all would be ready for the Hatter.

All Time needed to do was to synchronize the Pendulum's swing in perfect timing with The Wonder's arrival.

Total synchronization was the last step, and also his specialty.

It was a piece of cake, a task so simple that Time resented its lack of challenge.

A fool's errand in all the extension of the word.

"It's all done." Time exclaimed with triumph just as the Pendulum's bob and The Wonder were in position "It was fun. Good riddance, Hatter."

"Wait!"

Something…. Someone hit him from behind.

His connection with The Wonder and the Pendulum faded into nothingness as his face touched the Outland’s freezing ground. Time felt abandoned by the sudden disappearance of the bond between him and his inventions. The burden resting on his back hurt him, but that pain would heal.

What truly mattered were The Wonder and the Pendulum. Laying down on his belly and with his face caked with dust, Time searched for his lost inventions hanging up high somewhere in Underland's sky.

He founded them in a matter of seconds, but they were different.

The Pendulum had made its swing, but not in accordance to planned.

The machine was still moving, but it wasn’t going up.

"No!" He shouted in frustration. He stood up, forcing the intruder off his back with the same hostility a horse unsaddles an unworthy rider.

It was the Schnozzless. She held a small pot in her green hands, but when she realized Time was no longer in company of Tarrant, she cowered away from him in fear.

"You moron!" Time shouted at her, his anger deepened by the fear in the Schnozzless' eyes. "Do you realize what you've done?! You seed-brain, clumsy-legged, over-grown weed!"

"It blossomed." She stuttered.

"What?!!"

"Look."

Schnozzless showed Time the small sprout inside the pot, not out of enthusiastic happiness as she would have done with Tarrant, but more out of fear that Time would froze her and her little sprout in one moment for all eternity if she didn't.

The sprout, a miniature replica of the Schnozzless, waved hello to Time with a tiny leaf hand. For something so small, it was full of life.
"I tripped. I just wanted to show him..." She muttered. Her hands trembled as much as her voice. "I'm sorry."

Time felt how his anger died down, but it transformed into shock when the machine appeared again in the sky. It felt like a meteor, and found the end of its journey in the form of a fatal hit to the red castle.

It crashed right in the middle. With a deafening smash that came together with an earthquake, the castle separated into two like a broken heart.

Schnozzless gasped and suffocated a whimper with her free hand.

Time looked at the scene in disbelief.

He, Time, the Immortal, the Only, had failed.

Again.

He fell to his knees.

"Hatter." He said in an impulse.

He saw the Second lying on the ground like a rock.

A rock that could get on the way and make someone trip.

A rock he had put in the way.

He laughed. It was all so ridiculous, starting from his presence there.

What was he doing? What had he been thinking? Had he been thinking at all?

Like all previous times, his attempts to help a mortal had ended in chaos.

It had always been that way. He'd had no good reason to think it would be different this time, and yet, he had tried.

"It was all a mistake." Time gnashed his teeth. "I never should have left my castle. Wilkins, he ... he was-"

He would have continued to talk to himself all day long had it not been by Schnozzless' frightened voice reaching his ears in the form of a warning.

"Look!" She was standing next to him, her little spout imitating her scared expression without understanding the reason behind it.

Time couldn't ignore the urgency in her words and looked to where she pointed.

Like tiny dots of ink on a blank page, a group of figures became visible into the distance. They were far, but were on their way with a steady pace.

They were coming right at their direction. Soon, they would get there.

Soon, Time thought.

He had never thought he would dread the sound of that word.
Time had never understood what mortals had against the idea of *too soon*. Now, he was beginning to see why the concept was so dreaded.

His moment of doubt disappeared to give place to his instinctive need to push forward.

The intruding group would indeed arrive soon, that was a fact.

But it wasn’t too late to do something about it, Time thought.

It was never too late to make amends for one’s mistakes.

Mortals believe that.

Perhaps, just for that one desperate occasion, Time could believe it too.
"Who are you?"

Her eyes opened.

She felt the damp and cold touch of grass against her back.

Endless trees surrounded her.

Golden and green leaves fell from the branches and landed on the visible roots.

What was that place?

"Who are you?"

"A forest." She got back on her feet after a couple of tumbling attempts.

Having ground to stand on was an unfamiliar sensation.

Everything was.

Where was she?

How had she gotten there?

What had she been doing before?

"Are you a forest? You don't feel like any other forest I've met before. Not that I've met many. For a moment I thought your name was Tulgey."

The voice buzzed inside her ears like a bug trying to get out.

"Absolem?" She hoped to see a pair of blue wings fluttering nearby.

She looked and saw nothing.

She was alone.

The voice laughed.

"No, I'm not him. He is quite the character, but I'm more than he could ever be."

"Who are you?" It was now her turn to ask.

"What is this? I've never met a forest so curious."

"I'm not a forest!"

"Then who are you?"

"I'm-"

The rest was a blank space she could not fill. It was only after she tried to remember her name that she noticed how strange a concept it was for her.
She was nameless.

The thought frightened her, but she had more important things to worry about.

First of all, she had to get out of the forest. Once she did, she could wonder about her name all the time she wanted.

"Hello? Are you still here?"

She had no interest in following a conversation with something she couldn't see, even less in answering to its questions.

She walked and walked.

All paths were the same. It didn't take long before she wondered if she was moving at all.

Patience failed her and she began to run, thinking that her chances of moving to another place would increase if she moved faster.

She ran until she was out of breath. When she stopped and looked around again, she was in the same unchanging place as before.

She cursed.

Running had only gained her a racing heart and a dry mouth.

"Why are you so silent?" The voice sighed with grief, offended by her negligence. "What a shame. You are the most interesting being I've ever talked to, and you don't even know what or who you are. It's sad for you, but much sadder for me."

It sighed again.

She ignored it and continue to wander across the forest, this time at a slower pace. The repetitive images and absolute silence soon took their toll on her conviction.

Her body wasn't spared. Her legs started to shake and her shoulders felt heavier.

It was almost maddening, but she knew she had to go on.

She had to get out of there, out of that….

What was it called?

She was too tired to know.

"You aren't tired, you are forgetting," The voice stated with condescendence. "That's how the deepest part of these woods work. It makes you forget everything, even how to live. Didn't you know this before you ventured inside? If you did, then you are crazy, and if you didn't, then you are stupid."

"Silence!" She exclaimed. "If you won't say something useful, then you shouldn't speak at all."

"Ha! Where did you come from that you dare to speak to me like that?" The voice replied. "I'm happy to see there's still amusement in you, nameless thing."

"You worry too much about my name, but I don't recall you giving me yours when I asked." She
retorted.

She noticed the reddish scratches the branches had left on her hands and arms.

They didn't hurt.

That was convening, but also unsettling.

Though not deep, the injuries were bad enough to sting for a couple of hours. Yet, she felt nothing.

Was she already forgetting how to feel?

The voice remained silent.

She thought she had hushed it for good when it rang again in her mind.

"You are too bold for your own good, nameless thing." It growled. "It is only because you have proven to be mildly entertaining that I'll propose a deal: tell me your name, and I shall give you mine."

"You are so generous, but I refuse." She walked along a path she had already walked thrice. "With all your respect, your name is not as interesting as you may think, nor it would help me at all. You can keep it for all I care."

"A pity, I thought you were funnier than this." The voice sighed like a disappointed child after a failed tantrum. "Very well, how about this: tell me your name, and I'll tell you the way out of here."

She stopped walking.

"Why are you so interested in my name?"

"It's just sheer curiosity. Is that so bad a thing?"

"No, but… what is a thing?"

"Uh?"

"What is a thing?" She plummeted to her knees. "What… who am I?"

"Nameless thing!"

"Who?" She left the rest of her sentence hanging around in the air like a leaf in the wind.

"You're forgetting!" The voice shouted.

She tried to tell it to keep quiet, but her tongue had forgotten how to craft words.

"No, you won't leave my question unanswered. Your name! Tell me your name!"

The voice continued with its hissy fit. Each time, it grew angrier and more menacing.

But truth was, it was all the same for her.

Soon, she ceased to listen to it, and along with it, she stopped feeling everything else.

At one point, her awareness of being *someone* vanished.
The name she had borne, the problems she had endured, the memories she treasured… all were fragments of an existence so individual and trivial that they didn't feel worthy of being remembered.

Why would she want to go back to being one when she could part of all?

It was a dull but soothing sensation, like a dreamless sleep, she thought with a smile.

Her knees succumbed and she fell flat to the grass, leaving her in the almost the same position she'd been when she woke up.

_Comforting,_ she thought.

Her eyelids were half through to their final wink.

"You've almost forgotten everything, nameless thing." The voice lamented. "Soon you'll be nothing."

It laughed.

She would have laughed along with it, but she couldn't recall how it was done.

"And once you are nothing, you'll be everything." The voice stated with melancholy. "You won't be so different from me then. Farewell, nameless thing. Farewell."

"…ce!"

Her eyes sprang open just when her eyelids were about to meet. It was another voice, this one existing somewhere outside her head.

"What's that?" The voice urged with fear.

"…Alice!"

"I hear it." She said, her body starting to grasp the concept of movement once more.

"Who is that, and what does he say?"

"He's saying…something." By acknowledging the presence of the other, her own existence became clearer and more defined.

Letting go of the forest's empty but unified whole and back to her limited self felt like a bad exchange at first, but flawed as it was, her existence was hers alone.

Maybe it wasn't better than everything, but it was better than nothing.

She was…

"Alice!" She screamed with all the power of her lungs. "I'm Alice."

The happiness of having become one with herself again was broken with a high-pitched scream that almost shattered her eardrums.

"It's you!" Cried the voice with rampant fury. "Meddler! Why are you here? You aren't supposed to be! Go back, go back!"

The voice gnawed at her mind and it translated in Alice's body in the form of a headache. She pressed her head just above her eyebrows and shut her eyes.
"Go away, Meddler! Go away and never return."

"Enough!" Alice ordered, not knowing if she was speaking out loud. "I'm done with you. I'm not the meddler, you are!"

"Why do you insist in coming back?" The voice said with more bitterness than resentment.

"I don't owe you an answer." Alice hissed. She fought the voice out of her head.

The voice's brittle grasp on her mind broke like glass. Alice had expected more of a fight.

Maybe the voice's bark was more dangerous than its bite, our maybe it hadn't thought Alice had enough strength left to fight back.

It departed from her mind like a fallen sailor being dragged away by stormy waves.

Alice felt much lighter. She took a deep breath and took a moment to recover.

"Alice?" Said someone nearby, with the sounds of crushing leaves accompanying every step he took.

Alice heart skipped a beat.

This voice she knew.

"Tarrant?" Her words glimmered with hope. A smile appeared on her lips. "Is that you?"

"Alice! Where are you?"

"I'm here!" She screamed, following the trial of sounds her long lost friend left behind. "Wait for me, Tarrant!"

Amidst all the senseless confusion and uncertainties, Alice felt she was where she was supposed to be.

She was back to where she belonged.

"You don't belong here, meddler." The voice's interference came like a swift cut that almost rips Alice's mind in two.

She landed on the floor with a thump.

Her sight slowly went black. The last thing she saw was the fading image of Tarrant's fiery hair waving against the wind.

Then, a whisper.

"You never have."

The train's whistle woke her up.

She was exhausted.

Alice accepted her return to reality with a heavy sigh, and decided that if she wasn't going to get any more rest, at least she could ignore the world a little longer by keeping her eyes closed.
She tried to recall her dream, but it had faded away from her memory.

All Alice could recall were the remnants of an angered, hateful voice.

The feeling it gave her was dreary.

Perhaps, she thought, the dream was better left forgotten.

A light weight fell on her shoulder, followed by a silky touch against her cheek.

"Dinah." She said after a wide yawn. "It's too early. We'll play once get to Pekin, I promise."

"Pekin? Where's that?" Asked an eager voice. "Is it by the Snud or by the Queast? I must go there someday. Tell me, is it fun?"

"James." She bit her tongue almost to the point of bleeding. The fact he dared to talk to her in such carefree manner ignited her dormant temper in a flicker. "That's no way to talk to your captain, Harcourt."

"What's a James? Is a Harcourt some sort of food?" Alice heard him laugh and slap his knee. "I have no idea what you are talking about. You truly are bonkers, Alice!"

When he spoke her name, his voice echoed back to the diffuse remnants of her dream.

He wasn't James.

It was him.

A lump formed in her throat. She straightened so quickly that Dinah jumped off her shoulder in surprise.

"Tarrant?" Her eyesight was blurry. She rubbed her eyes and looked again, only to discover she had made it worse.

Everything looked like a painting spoiled by water, with shapeless forms and dispersed colors.

In all that misshaping, she recognized Tarrant's hair. It was so red that it looked as if could set things ablaze with a touch.

Was she dreaming?

The possibility wasn't unlikely.

But she didn't care if she was.

Even if she could just barely see him, Tarrant was still there with her.

For her, that was real.

That was all that mattered.

"Tarrant." She reached for him, knowing he would come to her arms and complete the embrace. "You're here."

Alice waited, and the more seconds passed, the more her glee transformed into uncertainty. Tarrant wasn't moving, and when he finally did, he simply held one of her hands.
The touch made her flinch.

The scratches in her hands were still fresh.

"Sorry, Alice." He said with sympathy. "I'm not him."

The revelation was disappointing but not shocking. Now that she heard his voice more carefully, she noticed several differences underneath the initial similarities between his and Tarrant's.

"Then who are you?" She demanded. She took her hand away from his and clenched it into a fist. "Speak!"

"Don't yell at me!" His voice broke in the last word, forcing him to clear his throat. He spoke as if he was a knight with a bruised honor. "I just saved you. At least thank me for that before you get angry at me. Shukm, now I see all grownups are grumps, whether they are from here or from the world above."

"The world above?"

"Of course! It's where you came from." Replied the other with little patience. "You must have hit your head real hard, or maybe you lost that memory for good in the woods. I know Upperlanders are wimps, but I didn't expect you to be one, Alice."

"How do you know me?" Alice asked, though she would have preferred to use more biting words against his accusations.

For now, she would let it slide, but if he insisted with his rough manners, she would teach him a lesson.

"How could I not when I've heard so many stories about you? You are the so called Champion of the White Queen, aren't you? The Jabberwocky-slayer, the fated heroine of Underland!"

Alice smiled.

As strange as it was to her all her epithets together, they swelled her heart with pride.

"So it's true then? Are you all of those things?" he insisted.

"You sound so surprised that it's almost offensive." Alice scoffed.

"No. It's just that…" He cleared his throat once more. "I don't know how someone becomes all of that in just one lifetime. It's amazing, especially coming from an Upperlander. You live such short lives. I guess it's better to live a short but exciting life than a long and boring one, wouldn't you agree?"

He spoke with a politeness that almost made Alice forget about his previous boldness.

"I suppose I do." She admitted after some thought.

"Of course you do. Otherwise you would be a very boring champion." He was so convinced of his words that Alice dared not to contradict him. "You must tell me everything about your deeds. Begin with the beheading of the Jabberwocky, and spare me the boring parts. Jump right into the action."

"You flatter me, but now it's not the time for stories." Had they been in any other situation, she would have spoken of her adventures for hours.
But her new situation hit her hard once her senses settled down.

She tried to analyze what was happening, but a loud laugh interrupted her train of thought.

"You say now not it's not the time?" The red-haired lad laughed to the point of tears. His tone wasn't cruel, but it was bitter and cynical. "Since when you care about Time, Alice? Not long ago, you almost killed him. You must tell me everything about that too! He and my family tell the story differently, but I'm sure their versions are just stupid bedtime stories compared to yours. Alice, the Time Slayer! That's a good title, don't you think?"

Alice's blood went cold in her veins. When put that way, her last quest sounded everything but heroic.

It was true, she had almost killed Time.

It had been a necessary.

If she hadn't, Tarrant would be dead.

It had to be done.

She'd had no choice.

Time knew that, and he had forgiven her. Her father's clock was the symbol of that forgiveness.

"No." She hissed.

"Uh?"

"Don't you dare to talk about it as if it was a fairytale."

"You don't have to get angry. I'm not judging you, and I will not tell anyone, I promise."

"You don't know what happened, even less why." Alice glared at him, hoping her damage eyes were making contact with his. "You are too young to understand."

"You are wrong!" He spat, back to his roughish ways. He stood up, his face shining as red as his hair. "I know more about it than you ever could. The whole Hightopp clan does, if you can still call a broken family a clan. We know, and we will never forget."

Alice glared at him.

"Are you truly related to Tarrant, then?" A direct question, she hoped, would get her a direct answer "What is he of you? Where is he? Please, you have to tell me."

"No, I don't." He said with indignation. "And if I did, I still wouldn't. I'm too young and stupid, am I not? Well, my childish idiocy won't disturb you any longer, Alice. Oh no, this young idiot has tickets to collect. See you later, or not."

"Wait a second. I never called you stupid- "

"You implied it. That's worse." He stepped out to the corridor. His steps made the floor trembled. "I don't want to talk with you anymore. Shukm, if I had known I would be treated this way, I would have stayed at home. At least they respect me there."

He was about to leave when something, the fluffy thing Alice had first thought to be Dinah, jumped
and slammed against his face.

The lad growled in pain and reacted just in time to stop the second assault.

Alice rubbed her eyes again. Her sight cleared, if just slightly. Now she could see the features of the boy's face and the thing that struggled in his hands.

The resemblance he had with Tarrant softened Alice's heart. Yet, the likeness became less evident the more she looked at him.

His face, though young, was stern and hardened. His frown gave him a perpetual angry expression.

"You little..." He hissed. Something that appeared to be gray borogove moved in his hands like a rabid pup. "If you do that again, I'll disarm you and bury each one of your pieces separately. Trust me, I will."

The threat passed unheard.

Next thing Alice knew, the gray borogove spat a black liquid right in his eyes, making him scream more out of anger than pain.

"I'll get you for this!" He said as fell on his back, rubbing his eyes and throwing kicks at every direction. "Fight me, you pesky coward!"

The borogove left him alone with his rant and went to Alice. It jumped on her lap clumsily and tackled its head against her ribs.

It tweeted in a manner Alice had never heard before. She tried to shoo it away back to its owner, who was still making a scandal in the wagon's corridor.

She almost pitied him. Alice knew that a pet, if untamed and untrained, was more a threat than a companion.

Then again, she couldn't expect a better behavior from the pet of a lad so rude.

Everything resembled its owner, she thought as she put the borogove down only for it to jump on her lap again.

"You are a curious thing." She put it down once more, and the process repeated. "And a very annoying one too."

She was about to do it all over again when the wagon's doors were slammed open.

Murmurs grew louder.

"Oh no." Whispered the red haired lad just before he was run over by a curious and varied mob.

Alice rubbed her eyes again.

The borogove hid behind her legs.

She saw clearer than before, but what she saw took her off guard.

Dozens of eyes were upon her as if she was an actress on stage ready to crack a joke or dance a jig.

"What's the meaning of this scandal? You've woken up my babies!" Complained a mother frog with
her arms overcrowded with tadpoles. One of them licked her eye in his attempt to catch a fly.

"Mine too." Said a father cod fish, opening his mouth and revealing his offspring still deeply asleep and snoring on his tongue.

Alice tried to point out his unjustified accusation when a dramatic sigh overcame all other sounds.

"Alas, poor guard! Fallen while on his duty." Lamented an old man wearing a newspaper-made suit as he picked the boy up and dusted off his clothes. "Why would you attack lad so dutiful? Throwing ink at someone's eye just because he asked to see your ticket is not very polite, young lady."

"Not polite at all." The rest of the mob chanted in unison. "Not even if she is part squid."

"What? No." Alice replied and cacthed the borogove before it had a chance to escape. The multitude watched her without blinking. "I didn't do anything. It was this- "

The guard blew his whistle with all the power of his lungs. Alice recognized it.

So it was him who had wakened her up and not the train. Her annoyance with him grew, and she wondered if someone so little charming could really be related to Tarrant.

The members of the multitude covered their ears and transported their attention to the guard.

"Nothing to see here. Go back to your seats and prepare your tickets. I shall pass and collect them as soon as I throw this free-loader off aboard." He squinted his reddened eyes and pointed at someone.

He pointed at the newspaper-suit man, who laughed at the ridiculous accusation and helped him point in the correct direction.

"Let this be an example of what happens when someone tries to get a free ride without a ticket, or lose it before I can collect it." He explained. "But worry not, the train will not be stopped in the meantime. Underland's train values the time of its passangers more than anything, that's our policy."

The announcement was received by the collective approval of the mob.

"It's the least they can do." Alice heard an elderly goat complain. "We lost so much time standing around by the Tulgey Woods. For a moment, I thought we would never move again!"

"True." Supported the mother frog. "You better let the conductor know about our discontent, guard. Remember: once you give bad service, you always give bad service."

"I'll make sure to let him know, ma'am. Now back to your seats, all off you. Otherwise, I'm afraid you'll have to join this freeloader in her not-so-gentle landing."

His words worked like a spell.

The multitude disbanded as if blown away by the wind.

"So long, bunch of frumious gossip." He scoffed as he finished cleaning his eyes with his sleeve. He walked towards Alice and offered her his hand. "Come, let's get you out of here before they come back."

"You really think I'll go with you so you can throw me off a moving train? I think some of that oil leaked into your brain and rot it."
"I would never do that! I simply said that so they would go away. Look, I may not like you as much as I thought I would, but..."

He scratched his ear.

It was hard for Alice to know what went through his mind. She waited in silence until he found the courage or the correct words to speak.

"Shukm, I'm not good at this." He said in exasperation. "You've helped my family before, so I'm supposed to be grateful for that, aren't I?"

Alice smiled and shrugged. "I did, but it's not a debt you must pay or a favor you have to return."

"Well, isn't that nice to hear." He offered his hand to her again, moving it eagerly. "Because we might be in need of your help again, Alice. In great need indeed."

Alice's breathing stopped.

"What are you talking about? What's happened?"

"We won't discuss it here." The other stated with authority. "Besides, it's him who wants to tell you. That's why he brought you back, after all."

"Who?"

"Why should I tell you when I can take you to him?" He snapped his fingers close to her face and hurried her up with quick movement of his hand. "We've spoken more than enough, let us go before he loses his patience. Hurry!"

Alice accepted his hand, if only to find out what was going on. His grip was gentler than she expected.

A moment later, she was running across the train's wagons so fast that tears escaped from her eyes.

On the good side, that speed gave no chance to the curious passengers to notice them. Only those with shaper eyesight identified them as they trotted by.

Some commented on the harshness of the punishment, while others agreed that it was the only way to prevent the train to become corrupted by stingy rascals who wouldn't buy their tickets.

That was a debate Alice didn't have the energy or interest to take part on.

She thought of how they would react if they knew they were about to get rid of the White Queen's Champion.

How many of them would think it was a good idea to throw her off the train then?

Perhaps it was a childish feeling, but their lack of respect, even if it was out of ignorance, didn't diminished Alice's indignation

That thought sparked some sympathy in her for Tarrant's young relative.

If her dignity could be so easily bruised, she could only imagine how brittle his was.

"Bim." He said without stopping.
Alice heard him, but couldn't understand what he meant.

"Say again." She said, with what was left of her breath

"Bim." He said louder so Alice could hear him. "It's my name, in case you were wondering. And if you weren't, that's too bad because I just told to you."

Bim, Alice thought.

Simple and easy to remember.

"We're here." He announced as abruptly as he stopped.

Alice stumped against his back with little recoil. She longed for a glass of water like never before.

He looked at her from over his shoulder and pointed at the metallic black door in front.

Dozens of sounds like the clanking of gears and the whistle of steam came from the other side. They came in a rhythm so perfect that they resembled music.

"Go in." Bim wiped his forehead with the back of his forearm. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

He snorted and turned around.

"Such courage! But is it real, Alice?" An amused grin similar to Chessur's lightened his face. "If it is real, then maybe I'll begin to understand why Tarrant speaks so highly of you. Maybe, just maybe."

Satisfied of having the last word, Bim let go of Alice's hand and went back on his steps, mumbling something about having to find that stupid puffball before it caused more trouble.

As he left, he ignored Alice's last question.

"Where's Tarrant?"

It was one out the many she had.

With resignation, she approached the dark door and put her hand on the knob. Her fingers went numb from the cold.

She pushed it open and went in before she had time to reconsider. The door shut on its own.

A cloud of smoke struck her face and filled her nose. It reeked of burning logs and rust.

She coughed and waved her hand to clear it away.

The smoke was as thick as cobwebs. Every time Alice's hand went through it, it left tangible traces on her fingers before it disappeared completely.

At the end of that gray curtain, there was a tall figure. The movement of his hands matched the rhythm of the sounds.

He pushed down levers and fed new logs to the fire without taking his eyes off of the road ahead.

His precision was flawless and captivating. Mesmerized, Alice stepped closer to him without making any sound.
That, at least, is what she thought.

The figure stopped moving and turned around.

The silent enchantment broke together with his movements, and when Alice looked at him again, her amazement turned into awe.

Slowly, she went back on her steps.

"At last, you're here!" He exclaimed. When he noticed Alice moved away from him, he lowered his tone. "Wait, it's me. Don't you recognize me? Am I really that forgettable? Will these blows to my self-esteem never end?"

Alice stopped.

"You?" she muttered.

"Ah, now I see why don't you recognize me. Wait, it'll take just a moment." He took a giant hat off his head and dropped it to the floor. Judging by the sound of the impact, it was no less heavy than an anvil.

Alice wondered how his neck could have supported the weight without breaking, and then she remembered that if he was whom she suspected, then that feat wouldn't be hard to pull off.

"Now I must stop this train. I can't drive it and talk to you at the same time without causing a tragedy!" He said.

He kicked a lever, and the train stopped with the same force as if it had crashed against a wall.

The impulse of the crash brought bad memories back to Alice. They were similar to a déjà vu, and left a shadow of sadness in her.

The tall man caught her by the arm just before she hit the floor and helped her stand.

Alice shook her head and hissed in pain. How many more crashes and sudden changes of speed would she have to endure that day?

It was only out of good luck none of her bones had broken or snapped yet.

Still, the injuries she had endured, though painless on their own, became a heavy burden altogether.

"You're hurt." He whispered with concern. "My dear child."

She heard his father's voice.

When she looked at him, his eyes rebuked her hopes.

They belonged to someone else.

Someone she indeed knew, but had never expected to see again.

"Time?"

"Of course. Who else you were expecting?"

"I don't understand."
"That doesn't surprise me. You're still just a silly kindergartner."

"You brought me back?" She insisted, not caring about his mocks. "Why? I thought you never wanted to see me again."

"Time's motives must not be questioned." Time stated sternly.

Alice's curiosity transformed into urgency.

She held Time's forearms tightly. He opened his sky-blue eyes wide open when she began to shake him.

"What's happened? Is everyone alright? Bim, he told me, but he didn't say much. Tarrant, is he ok?"

"Hush, child." Ordered Time, offended by the poor treatment he received. "You need to learn the meaning of patience."

"No, I'm done waiting." Alice let go of him and stood on her own in defiance. "I demand an answer. If I can't know how I came back here, then I must know why I was brought back. I can't help anyone if I don't."

"How dare you talk to me like that when you know who I am and what I represent?" Time folded his arms. "An impudent lass, that's what you are. You haven't changed since we last met."

"Well, neither have you!"

"Thank you."

"If you think that was a compliment, you're more deluded than I thought."

"It's not even been a day and you're already making me wonder what was I thinking when I brought you back."

"That's something I'd like to know too. If you can't tell me, then- "

The quarrel came to an end when the door opened and a flying gray borogove crashed against Time's face.

"Shukm, will you two stop already? Half the people on this train can hear what you're yelling." Bim entered the wagon, closed the door behind him and sat down on the floor with little care. "By the way Time, keep that thing under control. It was harder to catch than a rath in the wabe."

Time scowled at Bim.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so restless if you took better care of it. Look! You plucked some feathers off of it." Time held the borogove close to his chest. Its whimpering were pitiful. "What's wrong with you?"

"Of course I did, it must learn to treat me with respect. Besides, it didn't hurt it." Bim shrugged and scratched his nose. "It hasn't treated me very kindly either. Ask Alice, she knows."

"That isn't an explanation, it's just an excuse." Time scolded.

"Please." Bim rolled his eyes and put his hands behind his head. "Cry me a river."

Steam came out from Time's nape. Alice had never seen him so furious before.
"Rude and impertinent, just like his uncle!" Time ignored Bim and looked at Alice, transferring all of his indignation towards her. "Tarrant, the Hatter! He's the reason I brought you back. His meddling has caused me great trouble, more than you can imagine. We must correct it, or else..."

Bim got up in a single move and stood between them, pushing Time and Alice far from each other before another quarrel ensued.

"As entertaining as I find your bickering, you have most important things to take care of, Time." He spoke as if of mundane chores. "First of all, get rid of all the passengers. I don't want their gossip noses interrupting us at every chance they get. Don't worry, I'll make sure Alice doesn't go anywhere. Well, what are you waiting for? Go!"

Time swallowed his words with visible effort but complied against his will. He glared at Alice and Bim to let them know their discussion wasn't over, just on hiatus.

Grumbling and with the borogove following him like his shadow, he left the wagon.

"This new generation doesn't respect me. They don't!"

They waited until he was gone before they could calm down.

Alice found it harder than Bim to cool her head, but she found the strength to do so now that she knew that if anyone could give her answers, it was Bim.

"So you really are his nephew, aren't you?" Alice said after a deep sigh.

"No, heaven forbid it!" He exclaimed in fear.

"I meant Tarrant's, not Time's." If her mood wasn't so spoiled, Alice would have chuckled.

"Oh." Bim nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know; it didn't seem relevant at the moment." He shrugged. "In fact, it doesn't seem relevant now. You know he's my uncle, but that hasn't made you any less confused about what's happening, has it?"

Alice had to admit he had a point.

"Still, it wouldn't have hurt if you had." She rebuked.

"True, it wouldn't." Bim sat down again. "Anyway, how about I explain you everything now? I'd much rather we skipped this boring talk, but I like you a bit more now, Alice. It's always fun to see Time lose his temper, and you just made my day."

He patted the spot next to him, inviting Alice to join him.

She hesitated, thinking he wasn't the most reliable source of information.

She knew he would cut the parts he didn't find interesting, or modify some to his own benefit.

In the end, she joined him. An unreliable narrator was better than no narrator at all.

"Speak, then." Alice ordered, resting her arms on her legs.
"That I will. Because you see Alice..." Bim grinned. Alice saw Tarrant's reflection on his face, and imaging it was him who told the tale made her more at ease. ",now it seems it's the time for stories. You know that, don't you Alice? I know you do."
The Royal Coterie

Chapter Notes

There are no words to say how sorry I am for my absence. Shakespeare, essays and stress took over my life for the last month. I blame them and my great talent for procrastination for all the time I didn't update. At least it's now over... until January. I'll try to complete this new story arc soon, and finish the fic somewhere around next May (I'll try!)

Thank you so much for your patience and support! I love you, my readers and fellow writers.

Enjoy!

The White Queen's royal coterie.

Seven members.

Bayard led the way with his gifted nose and acute hearing.

Mc Twisp's knowledge and sensibility kept the objectives clear and the members focused. However, his twitching whiskers and the constant glances he gave to his pocket watch altered everyone else's nerves.

It was fortunate that one of the Tweedles was there to lighten up the mood, be it willingly or not. Even in the absence of his twin, he always found the way to put a smile on the others' faces.

The other Tweedle was fulfilling his position as the Red Queen's manservant.

Whatever errand she imposed, he had to comply.

Maybe he was looking for the pig with the warmest belly to soothe her royal feet; maybe he was making sure nobody ate her tarts; maybe he was bored to death; maybe he was just standing around like an idiot.

Unbearable as it sounded, the Tweedles seemed to like their new roles as Iracebeth's personal lackeys.

One more than the other, but to tell which one enjoyed it the most was difficult.

Returning to the coterie, the last four members were far more interesting than the other three.

Among them, the newest member was worthy of mention.

He was brave and strong.

Underland had never seen a man so courageous. Even the most legendary of the White Knights would pale in comparison.

The White Queen had been so impressed with him that she had offered him a place among her army,
but he had refused.

A bold move, some may say, but for this young man, no action was too daring, no mountain too high, no river too deep…

"Bim, is this the story of what happened, or a ballad about yourself?"

"Can't be both?"

"No. Besides, that whole thing about Mirana offering you to become one of her knights didn't happen, did it?"

"Yes. Well, no. Come on Alice, I was just trying to spice things up."

"And I don't condemn your imagination, I'm just telling you to save it for later. For now, try to stick to the facts of what happened."

"The facts are boring. I'm not writing a history encyclopedia."

"Bim."

"Fine, fine, I'll tell you the boring version. Grown-ups, seriously… Anyway, we were searching for Tarrant near the skirts of the Outland's mountains. You don't know what 'cold' is until you spend hours there, wandering around in circles like mindless borogoves. Now, it's not as if I can't put up with a harsh weather. Boredom, on the other hand…"

"You had the others. Bantering with them is always interesting, and it could have helped you kill some time. Not literally, of course."

"Not with the mood they were in! Bayard was too busy following the trial to pay attention to me; McTwisp was so tense that I thought he would break into pieces if I say a word to him, and the Tweedles are fun, but if any of them speaks more than five seconds in a row, I get the sudden need to smack them."

"I don't think the Queen or the others would have liked that."

"Who cares about what they'd liked? The point is that I was bored out of my mind. When Zanik told me the Queen had accepted me in the coterie in charge of finding Tarrant, I thought I would finally have some excitement in my life. But the searches were no more entertaining than being at home. At least there I was comfortable, not freezing to death with a group of grumps who didn't truly want me with them."

"So you were fed up. I get that, but then what happened?"

"Ah, that's easy. I got an idea. Mally tried to stop me; she's always whispering in my ear like a gnat, but as long as she doesn't poke me with her pin, she is easy to ignore. You remember the Bandersnatch? Well, he was part of the coterie too, though at first I thought he was just the pet of the group. He was walking behind us, covering us in case of an ambush or any sort of danger. He was rider-less, and I was cold and tired…so the idea just came to me. Mally wasn't happy about it, not at all. I still remember how she screamed into my ear…"

"Bim, no!"
But it was too late. Hanging from his shoulder, Mally could only watch how the lad jumped on the Bandersnatch's back. He held on to his fur, trying to make him yield to his command.

The white beast growled in confusion, but it wasn't until Bim dug his heels on the Bandersnatch's sides that it went on a rampage.

It dashed forward like a stampede. Mc Twisp gave out a high shriek as he dodged the Bandersnatch's giant paw just before it crushed him.

The Tweedle, unable to decide where or why he should run, became paralyzed in the middle of the road. It was only out of sheer luck that he was spared from being rolled over by the Bandersnatch.

Bayard heard the chaos and put himself out of danger before it reached him.

"Now this is an expedition!" exclaimed Bim as he pulled the Bandersnatch's fur as if it were reins. The beast roared and kicked.

"Now I'm free to go wherever I please. Let's see who dares to get in my way while I mount this thing!" His words came out mangled and rushed. The only one who could hear his boasting was Mally.

With great effort, the brave dormouse made her way from Bim's shoulder to the Bandersnatch's eye.

"Enough!" She screamed. She was so close to his yellow eyeball that she almost touched it with her nose.

Her glittering unsheathed pin was enough to calm the Bandersnatch.

"Good boy." Mally patted his nose. She then climbed to his head and gave a killer look to Bim. He kept kicking the Bandersnatch in hopes of making him move again.

"What's going on here?" Demanded Bayard. "Why has the Bandersnatch attacked out of a sudden?"

"It didn't attack." Mally replied dryly and pointed at Bim. "This stupid child provoked. Bim, I've told you before. You can't ride the Bandersnatch unless it has given you his approval, and for that to happen, you need to earn his respect first, not treat him like a wild animal."

"You won't win anyone's respect if you keep this up." Added Mc Twisp. He held his pocket watch close to his ear; it had a small fracture in the middle. "Oh dear, for a moment I thought it was broken. You should be glad it isn't, or else the Queen would hear of your behavior."

Bim rolled his eyes and shrugged. The Bandersnatch glared at him from over his shoulder blade, but Bim gave to him the same importance he had given to the complaints of the others.

"What are you yammering all about? Nobody got hurt; you need to take a deep breath and relax. Am I right, Chess?"

"Indeed, young Hightopp." A gray cloud materialized into a cat on top of the Tweedle's head. "These kind of royal groups always overflow with tension, and try to find an outlet to it in the most trivial of matters."

"Don't humor him, Chessur. He almost hurt us all." Said Mally with little patience. "And mind your words, or should I remind you are part of this group as well?"

"Of course you can remind me, as long as I remind you that I never formally accepted to be a
member." Chessur smile accentuated to the point his face almost rips into two. "My membership is a wavering thing."

Mally unsheathed her pin again.

"If finding Tarrant is not of your concern, then leave. We needn't deadweights."

"Come now Mally, the last thing we need is conflict among us." Appeased Mc Twisp. His ears flickered at the rhythm of his blinking.

The cat laughed and departed from the Tweedle’s head. Bim looked at him with an amused grin.

"Well, aren't we in an ungrateful mood." Chess sneered at Mally. "And I had thought that my little meddling in the crowning would gain me some indulgence. Do you know how long it took me to guide that flock of borogoves to the castle? More than any other cat would be willing to accept, I assure you."

"That was the best part of that stupid ceremony. Besides my uncle's performance, of course." Bim chuckled. "The only way it could have gone better is if he had beheaded the bloody-"

With a single jump, Mally landed on Bim's ear and stung his lob with the tip of her pin. He screamed in pain and surprise.

"Think before you speak, boy. You can't take your words back once you say them." She folded her arms and went back to her rightful place on Bim's shoulder.

Mc Twisp tried to express his opinion about Mally's treatment of the lad, but Bayard stopped him.

"So much violence." Sighed Chessur with faked indignation. "It's time for me to go. Goodbye."

His body began to vanish like smoke against the breeze.

"You will stay." Mally ordered.

"Not if I don't want to." His face darkened with his last words. "Just like Tarrant didn't. If that's the case, why are we even looking for him in the first place? Is bringing him back home our noble mission, or just our selfish wish? Two interesting questions, aren't they?"

Mally gasped.

Chessur disappeared.

The echo of his laugh hung in the air even after he was gone.

"Where's the cat gone?" asked the Tweedle as he scratched his head.

"Who cares about where he's gone. It's his vanishing skill that matters." Bim commented and then looked at Mally. "I hope he is willing to teach me."

"Hush, Bim." Mally jumped tack to his ear. "Now it's not the time for those silly thoughts. It's your uncle we are searching for. Show some concern and behave as you must, or I shall pierce your lob and put an earring on it to make sure you don't forget."

"That won't be necessary at all!" Urged Mc Twisp when he saw the dormouse more than ready to carry on with her threat.
"Actually, that would be great." Said Bim with enthusiasm. "I've always wanted an earring! Mother wouldn't be too pleased, though. But that's alright, I'll just have to take it off once I bring her back home. What you don't know can't hurt you, right?"

Slowly, Mally put her guard down.

"What's with that look?" asked Bim with annoyances. "Stop it, Mally. I don't need coddling! I'm not a child."

"Is that so?" Replied Mally with a smug grin. "Well, you sure fooled me."

"Be it with that darn pin or with your words, you always have to find a way to sting me, don't you? You've got some gall, considering I could defeat you in a fight in just one second." Said Bim with playful arrogance.

Mally laughed at the suggestion.

"You wouldn't defeat me even with my eyes closed, boy."

"My feet say otherwise, dormouse."

"That wouldn't be an honorable fight."

"True, but it still would be a victory."

"Those are some great ideals, Bim."

"Thanks."

"Is your mind so witless that it is as immune to sarcasm as it is to discipline?" Mally brushed her whiskers and didn't waver when Bim returned to her an angry glare. "Luckily for you, that's not something without a remedy. I could teach you the art of the sword, so you may fight like a warrior and not a mindless brute. Who knows, it could also help become something more than a brat, as impossible as it may sound."

Bim's eyes widened.

"You're jesting me."

"I jest you not."

Bim raised his hands up in the air. He laughed like a maniac until he suddenly stopped and looked at Mally with very serious eyes.

"I will use a sword and not a dressmaker's pin, right?"

"What? Of course you'll use a sword." Answered a confused Mally.

The positive answer allowed Bim to continue with his celebration. It didn't take long before the Tweedle jumped to the Bandersnatch back to join the uproar, much to the beast's grief.

Bayard and Mc Twisp watched the scene from afar.

"I think I'm beginning to see the nephew's resemblance to the uncle." Said Mc Twisp as he covered his ears. "Though I wish he would dance the Futterwacken instead of doing all this shouting. I will go deaf for sure."
"Tarrant can take care of mending that flaw once we find him." Bayard cocked his head and pointed north with his stout. "Let's keep going. The day grows old and we-"

A lighting in the sky blinded the coterie. Immediately, an earthquake made the ground crack and the trees shiver.

The Tweedle shouted when he fell off the Bandersntach.

Mally would have suffered the same fate had she not grabbed one of Bim's red locks in the last second.

He managed to stay on the Bandersnatch back only by digging his nails deep into the fur. He did it with so much strength that he pulled off various threads of white hair.

After a moment of disconcert, the group recovered their senses.

"What… what was that?" Asked Mc Twisp, his eyes wide open and his ears up in alert.

"Something fell. A shooting star, maybe?" Bayard shook his body and licked a small wound on his paw. He sniffed the ground. "Whatever it was, we must investigate. It fell on the other side of these mountains."

Mc Twisp gasped.

"You can't be serious! We cannot simply rush into—"

"THE OUTLANDS! YES! EVERYONE, FOLLOW MY LEAD! BIM HIGHTOPP AND HIS LOYAL BANDERSNTACH, AWAY!"

"Bim, no!" Shouted everyone.

"Bim yes!" He replied.

He dug his heels on the Bandersnatch’s sides again, this time stronger than before, and soon they disappeared into the freezing mountains, with Mally bouncing on Bim's shoulder as she tried in vain to stop them.

Mc Twisp and Bayard looked at each other, but knew words would no longer be of help, and instead decide to chase after them before they got out of sight.

As for the Tweedle, he was left behind, and spent various minutes looking at the clouds before he remembered his duty and went after the rest, with a ghastly gray smoke following right behind him.

"That was the best day of my life. I swear I would have ridden for all time across that empty wasteland if Time himself hadn't appeared. Meddling fool..."

Alice shook Bim by the shoulder before he got too lost in his memories.

"Focus!" She ordered. "Are you saying that Time was in the Outlands? That you simply found him there? Bim, I swear, if this is another of your 'additions' to the story..."

"You just saw Time, didn't you?"

"But I thought... I thought you had gone to him and ask for his help. You know, that you had gone through all that ordeal to enter his realm in Mirana's grandfather clock." Alice pondered, biting her
thumb’s nail. “How could he be out of his castle if Mirana has him locked inside? And why would he even go to the Outlands?”

“"My uncle convinced the Queen to let Time come to Witzend, only from time to time, of course.” Said Bim, with an amused grin at his wordplay.” I don't know why he did that, though. Don't get me wrong, Time is... interesting, I guess, but he treats us as if we were mud on his boots! The looks he gave to my family when we had tea time with him at Thackery's still make my blood boil.”

"And that's very hard to accomplish...." Alice muttered to herself.

"Those tea parties were stupid, I know, but...he didn't appreciate them at all! Not one bit. We put a lot effort in them, you know? Especially my uncle and my mother. He could have at least say thank you to them once in a while.”

"Time is not one to be thankful, Bim. Especially not directly."

"He's a blabbering scut."

"No! Well, maybe a little. Look, he's spent only he knows how many years all by himself. It's only natural if social skills are a bit rusty. We can't judge him too harshly."

"He's a blabbering scut."

"Who's a blabbering scut?” Asked Time. He closed the wagon's door behind him and removed his heavy hat from his head. The Second rubbed against his cheek and made him sneeze with the touch of its feathers.

"Look in a mirror, then you'll know the answer. That's if your reflection doesn't break it first..."

"Silence! Kicking those pesky passengers out of my train depleted all my patience. I'm not in the mood for your jabs." Time cracked his neck and forced one of his gears to get back in place. “Ah, that's much better.”

The sound it made reminded Alice of the occasion Harper had dislocated his shoulder in the middle of a storm, and how James had pushed back in place with all the weight of his body.

"So, are you done telling her all she needs to know?” Urged Time. "Hey, don't doze off when I'm talking to you!"

Bim gave out big snore before waking up.

"I told her my part, now you tell her yours. I'm not your personal story-teller, Time. Now shut up, that little expedition into the Tulgey Woods really tired me up.” He folded his arms and leant his head against the wall. "Wake me up when you're done."

Bim fell asleep before Time could complain, as if someone invisible had knocked him unconscious.

Alice gave tried to wake him up with a gentle nudge, but either he was a quick sleeper, or very good at pretending to be one.

"Amazing, just what I needed. Now I have to be the bed-time story teller of the kindergartner. How low have I fallen." Time grunted as he roughly sat down next to Alice, who glared at him in reproach. "Alright then, where did he leave you? Did he even say anything relevant, or just wasted his breath with his invented, self-flattering tales? Every time is the same, I swear..."
Alice told Time everything about Bim's tale.

He listened in silence, twirling his moustache as if in deep thought.

"He told you many things." He commented in disapproval. "And very few were relevant. And he calls me blabbering..."

"So it's true then?" Asked Alice. "Time, were you really wandering the Outlands?"

Time scoffed.

"I wasn't 'wandering', child. I had a reason to be there. Unlike you mortals, I don't waste myself in banal activities like 'wandering'."

"Well, your Usefulness, what is this glorious purpose you're talking about?" Asked Alice, imitating the uptight voice of Lady Ascot.

Time mistook the jab for respect, and his voice mellowed with arrogance.

He told Alice with great detail about all the troubles Tarrant had caused him. His humor was good enough to answer to Alice's questions, but only in monosyllables. Pleased or angry, Time's annoyance for interruptions remained the same.

Alice felt her heart grow heavier with every word.

Tarrant had searched for her.

He longed to see her, just as she longed to see him too.

But now...

"But... he is fine, isn't he? Tarrant is safe." Alice stuttered, grabbing Time by the arm. "Time?"

He wavered and looked away.

"I... I have no way to know." He accepted shamefully. "I can't give you an answer."

"Nonsense! I remember... in your castle. The rooms of the dead and the living," Alice demanded. Her memories rushed before her eyes. "You are the one who keeps the departed away from those still alive. If something happened to Tarrant, you'd know, Time. You could have checked; if you didn't, is because you didn't want. Don't try to fool me."

"Indeed, if I had been in my castle, in my rightful place, I would be certain." Time looked down. "But how am I supposed to know when I haven't been there for so long? Not ever since the Hatter dragged me out with his pitiful stories and his cursed stubbornness."

He then looked at Alice. His sky-blue eyes shone like sapphires in the grayness of the wagon.

"If I didn't go back, it's because I couldn't. Trust me, child, I tried... but my failed attempt to bring you and the Hatter together came at a high cost."

He didn't look behind him.

He had to keep moving forward.
That was, in essence, his nature.

"Not so fast…" Begged the fruit soldier. She held her tiny sprout child close to her chest.

"Silence!" Time held her other hand tightly. He too had a burden to carry: the unresponsive Second was as light as a feather on his arm. "Just keep moving."

The speed was normal to him, but to the fruit soldier it felt no different than a free fall. It could only be worse for the tiny sprout in its pot.

Time was aware of their situation, but he couldn't let it interfere with his goals. They had to reach Iracebeth's castle before the strangers catch up to them. Time didn't know who they were, but he knew nobody would be pleased to see him.

Time felt the same way.

He had seen enough of Underland.

It was time for him to go home and never return.

He stopped abruptly at the castle's entrance and pushed his way to the entrance. Many of the fruit people were already trying to measure the damage their home had received after Tarrant's failed flight.

"Hey, you." One of them tried to stop him. "What's going on?"

Time escaped his arm and sneaked into the castle before they could try to catch him again.

The fruit soldier gasped in shock at the sight of her destroyed castle:

The walls were cracked, with many of them reduced to shambles. The decorations and memorials her people have built to honor those who had perished under Iracebeth's command were now just piles of crumbles on the floor.

The worst of it all was the crimson scar on the ground. It was a perfect circle, as if someone had buried a full moon.

The earth looked freshly dug.

It was the same size as…

"Wait!" Time felt how she escaped from his grasp.

She ran and fell to her knees next to dark mark.

"He's not here." She said in dismay. Her child imitated her grief. "He should be. Why isn't he? How? Unless …"

She caressed the wounded ground with her fingers, as if she was tracing a sentence.

Time felt a nervous shock of energy travel his body.

"It swallowed him." She said, and unknown to her, she accomplished what few ever had: she made Time shiver. "He's underground now."
"I don't care." Time couldn't stand the sight of the scar on the ground for one more second.

He pushed away the memories of the Hatter and leapt towards the fruit soldier.

This time, he held her hand with more gentleness, but not less firmly.

"It's done. He knew the risks." He explained as he guided her upstairs through the remnants of the stairs. "I'm not to blame. He knew."

"But…" she started, with anger showing in her tone.

"But nothing!" Time shouted. "I did what he asked me. I owe him nothing. I have no reason to be here anymore; I'll go back to my realm and you'll never see me again."

"But what about him?" She said in a hushed whisper. "He didn't go up, he went under."

"Irrelevant! It's not about him." Declared Time as he kicked the grandfather clock's room open with a kick. "Not anymore."

He took a step inside, and felt a twist in his stomach as his foot found nothing but empty space. He would have fallen through the hole where the floor had once been if the fruit soldier hadn't grabbed him by the wrist.

Time lost his balance and fell on his back. The Second escaped from his arm.

It rolled away to a distant corner.

Before tending to it, Time's attention was fully fixed in the destroyed room.

The accident had transformed it into nothingness, and gone with it was also the grandfather clock.

Nothing remained of it, apart from tiny shattered pieces incrusted on the wall.

An overload of energy made Time's nape sparkle.

"No." He knelt, and small grabbed a small remnant of his former way back home. "Now what? Am I trapped in here? No, no. That can't be right!"

His imminent breakdown was cut short when the noises of the intruders came from the castle destroyed entrance. They had arrived too quickly.

How could that be?

No mortal feet could match Time's pace, except maybe the Turtle.

Or the Bandersnatch.

"No." Time got up and took a peek to the broken doors of the entrance. "It can't be them."

He saw a white mountain with some fools riding on its back talking to the other fruit folk.

His clock-heart skipped a second when he saw the recognized the distant figure of the Hatter.

Quickly enough, the more normal features of the lad gave him an identity of his own.

At one moment, he had been peacefully talking to a fruit guard, and suddenly, he was jumping off the Bandersnatch's back with his fists high up in the air, prepared for battle.
The rest of the intruders revealed their identities shortly after his outrage:

The hound, the rabbit and one of the annoying pair of meatballs. They tried to separate the Hatter doppelganger and the poor scared fruit guard.

Lingering above them, Time saw a small cloud of gray smoke that irregularly shapeshifted into a cat.

Finally, he heard the squeaky voice of the dormouse.

Her words made no sense for Time, but they fueled his despair.

"Those idiots again." He gritted his teeth and threw his hat to the floor with disdain. "They'll blame me for this… like they always have. Those mindless, oversized vegetables will them everything!"

"We will not." Reassured the fruit soldier.

Time scorned at her suggestion, and asked her with cruelty how she could be so sure.

"Because I promised him. He made us promise." She answered. "That we would not tell anyone that he was here, or what he was doing, not even to the White Queen herself. He may be underground now, but I'll keep my word. We all will."

Time was at loss of words, and regretted with a wounded pride not having done the same. They would protect the Hatter, but why would they protect him?

They feared him at best, and despised him at worst.

They owed him no loyalty or consideration.

Then again, given the simplicity of their minds, Time knew they probably wouldn't mention him if the intruders didn't ask anything related to him first.

"Curse it!" Time hissed, still a little stung by the fact the Hatter had shown more sensibility than him.

He punched what remained of a wall, and his fist became tangled in the red creepers. It took him several attempts before he could free it.

The creepers clung to his body as hungry leeches. He couldn't understand how the Hatter had willingly use that rotten infestation to sew his clothes, even less eat them.

That idea was beyond mad.

A spark made his eyes glitter.

He couldn't remember having thought of something so ridiculous before.

Yet, he didn't have a better plan.

Time smiled with bitterness, and wished the Hatter's madness, if it had rubbed off on him, wouldn't linger for long.

"Wait." He said calmly to the fruit soldier. She stopped and sighed. She had been so close to escape and leave him behind, but Time wasn't one to be fooled so easily. "It's only a matter of me before those fools enter, and I… I need your hel—"

Time bit his tongue.
"Huh?" She asked. One of her expressionless eyes was wide than the other.

"Just go along with what I'll say! Nothing more." Time proclaimed as he started to pull several creepers from the wall and putting him all over his body. He hesitated at first, but decided it was necessary to cover his face too.

After some thought, it was obvious that it was the most important part that should remain unseen.

Time shivered in discomfort at he damp feeling of the creeper extending to the back of his head, though it left his gears untouched.

The fruit soldier stared at him with disgust, with her child in the pot imitating her every motion, though she seemed to enjoy the show more than her mother.

"Have you become mad?" She asked Time.

Time took his eyes off his creeper-covered hat and glared at her.

"It's the Hatter's fault." He said. "All of this is."

She nodded in disagreement, but the echo of the doors of the palace being slammed open became more important to her than a retort.

Time clenched his teeth and made sure his hat covered his nape in its totality.

Had it beaten like a mortal heart, the clock of his chest would have marked the seconds at the pace of a fleeing rabbit.

The steps of the intruders became louder and closer. They were already halfway through the destroyed staircase.

"Leader of the Green Folk, surrender! Bim Hightopp and his loyal coterie will not show mercy if you —Shukm! Mally, that one really hurt." Cried a young man.

"Silence! This isn't a battle."

"You drew blood! You better have the earring you promise or else… I'll be really disappointed."

Time ignored the rest of the conversation and braced himself for the inevitable encounter.

"Remember." He said to the fruit soldier, who was no better prepared than he was. "Just play along with my charade."

"No." She said, much to Time's surprise. "You're scary."

"Listen!" exclaimed Time. "I need you to follow my lead one more time. I need… I need you help."

Something inside Time, most likely a chunk of his pride, fell apart with those words.

The fruit soldier didn't answer.

Time's fate now rested in the decision of a compilation of sentient fruits and vegetables.

Had Time known this was what expected him in the world outside his realm, he never would have left.
And it all was thanks to the Hatter.

'Well done, you fool.' Time thought without emotion just as the intruders entered the room. 'Well done indeed.'

Time yawned.

The feather-covered Second had jumped to Alice's lap at moment of the story, and wasnow deeply at rest.

Bim snore loudly, his head resting on one of Alice's shoulders as if it was a pillow.

"And then..." He yawned again. His eyes flickered. "Things happened, many of them were stupid, and now I'm here... The end."

"Hey, that's not the right way to end a story!"

"It's not the right way, but it's still a way..."

"Time!"

"Hush, child. Let me sleep." Time rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. "Being the conductor of this cursed train... is not easier than being me."

"You can't leave me hanging like this." Alice protested. "What about what happened? What about Tarrant?"

"Yes, yes..." Time whispered. "I'll tell you later. Not now, no... For even Time needs time to rest now and then."

Alice wondered when he had become so lazy, but Time fell asleep before she could ask him.

She tried to wake him up, but accomplished nothing.

Soon, the snoring of the three sleeping beings became one single sound that resembled a song.

Its melody trapped Alice in a heavy drowsiness.

For Alice, it felt wrong to be in such a lax state when the status of Tarrant was something unknown to her. With the power of all of her will and mind, she tried to stay awake.

But the exhaustion of her body overcame her, and Alice fell asleep without noticing.

A moment later, her soft breathing joined Bim's snoring, Time's sleep talking and the Second's ticking, and it transformed the song into a more peaceful tune.

One that almost sounded like a lullaby.

---

_Tick, tock...
_Tick, tock...

The pocket watch still worked.
Wilkins pressed it until creaked.

Then, he left it hanging in its rightful place.

It had been just a shallow hope, but he felt disappointed that it wasn't the interloper's watch the one that had stopped.

Without enthusiasm, and with the help of several Minutes, he reached for the watches hanging in farther places amidst the endless sky of the living.

He kept searching for the right one.

Time was able to finish that eerie task in a heartbeat, but he wasn't around.

Until he returned, it was Wilkin's duty to do so in his place.

"Sir." He said to himself. He found the broken watch. The golden chain that connected it to the sky collapsed at his touch. "Come back."

The watches kept ticking.

Tick, tock…

Tick, tock…
Hey guys! I'm back. My absence was mostly due my new job, my first one actually. I'm going back to school on monday, so goodbye work and hello school. Hopefully that'll give more time to write.

Thank you for your pantience. I hope you enjoy the chapter.

She knew she was sleeping.
The realization came in a trivial moment.
It transformed her dream into an illusion.
She knew there was no need to worry.
She'd wake up soon.
Eventually.
She would-
Alice…
The dream shattered, but the remnants were filled with his voice.
Alice…
"Alice?"
"ALICE!"
She opened her eyes and gasped.
Bim was kneeling in front of her. He held the Second in one hand and poked Alice's forehead with the other.
"At last! For someone so slim, you truly are a heavy sleeper." Bim mockingly observed.

Alice growled and slapped his hand away from her.
"Upperlanders sure are lazy, or is it just you?" He laughed. "For a second there, I thought you'd never wake up. You almost made me worry, and I when I say almost, I mean that I wasn't worried at all."

"Oh, really? That explains why you wanted to throw a bucket of ice-cold water to her face the first time she didn't answer." Time sneered as he pulled the train's breaks. The machine exhaled a scentless cloud of smoke and its wheels creaked against the rails.
Once he made sure all the controls were in order, Time went back to Bim and Alice.

"Was is it really necessary for Alice to know that? No, it wasn't, so why waste yourself by saying it?" Bim growled. "I guess Time is not as wise as they say."

"Again with this they. I don't care about what they say! And trust me, young loon, you have no right to complain about me being wasted in telling useless information." Time leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Especially after considering that seems to be your only talent."

"You're just jealous because you are a horrible story teller. Shukm, you put us all to sleep, remember?"

"I did not."

"Then what did it?"

"The tiredness."

"What?" Bim exclaimed, a vein in his forehead pulsed at an alarming speed. When it seemed as if he was ready to tackle Time, he scratched his chin and nodded calmly. "Well, that's actually a very good point. You win this round, Time."

"To defeat a fool is a hollow victory." Sighed Time.

"I heard him." Alice intervened before Bim had the chance to proceed with their charade. They looked at her with equal confusion. "Tarrant... he was calling for me. In my dream, I... I heard him."

"Nonsense." Time buffed. "You heard only the voice of his little doppelganger over here. He repeated your name so many times that my head almost explodes."

"It's a shame it didn't." Bim replied.

"It was Tarrant." Alice insisted adamantly. "I know it."

There was a moment when Time wavered, but his skepticism was no less stubborn than Alice's conviction.

Bim listened to Alice with gullible interest, and seemed to believe all that she said.

She smiled and felt a twinge of gratefulness for the lad.

"So if one goes Underground, you reach Alice's dreams?" He mused with his eyes lost into the distance. "Hmm, it seems logical if you think about it. So that's where my uncle's been all this time. Is your head really that interesting, Alice? If it is, I should pay visit to it too!"

"I'd rather keep my head tourist-free, thank you kindly." Stated Alice. "Besides, Tarrant's not there. I've been hearing his voice in my dreams lately, just after the whole Chronosphere... incident happened."

Time scoffed.

"Incident? What a curious way to call it." He said with bitterness. "And very convenient too."

"In- in any case." Alice stuttered. Her ears were red and burning. "I may hear Tarrant, but I never manage to reach him, or see him. Not clearly, at least. He fades away in the last second, just before
we can find each other. This time it was the same."

Bim grunted as he processed the information. He put the Second on his head and folded his arms. He remained quiet long enough to allow Time to speak without interruptions.

"It sounds to me that you and the Hatter need the same thing." Time looked at Alice. His stern eyes matched perfectly with the rigidity his voice.

"What is it?" She asked, moved not only by curiosity, but also by the faint hope that Time could have an answer.

He was Father Time, after all. The two symbols of wisdom mashed together in one entity. His words, while not always worthy of being followed, were at least always worthy of being listened.

"You both need to move on."

The words broke Alice's thoughts like a stone shatters a window.

She frowned.

What she had previously considered to be solemnity now sounded like condescendence. In many ways, Time's voice reminded her of her mother's. Helen would use the same tone whenever she scolded Alice for her irreverent ideals and vulgar behavior, as she had once referred to her conduct.

The memory of her mother was no free of sadness, but it didn't appease Alice.

"And how would you know?" She grunted.

"I've told you, girl." Time didn't react to her gall. "It was the Hatter's longing for you that caused all this trouble. And from what you've just said, your longing for him is also to blame."

"Me?" Alice stood up and faced Time. "How dare you accuse me when I barely know what happened?"

"Because whether you know or not, it still happened. That cannot be changed." 

"I wasn't even here!"

"Wrong. You were. Not in body, but in essence." Time stated. "Just as he plagued your dreams, you plagued his. He told me of how he did little else other than sleeping after you left. It was because of those ill encounters that he grew desperate enough to seek my help, while you became so fond of them that you couldn't accept the fact you were never going to see him again. You left the door open, and he kept peeping to the other side. Had you closed it, the Hatter would have had no choice but to accept his place here; and had he stopped lurking nearby, you would have forgotten and enjoyed your own land in peace. But neither did, and these are the consequences."

Alice's mouth was dry. She was too upset to look more closely at Time's words and discover whatever truth they could hold.

She sensed something else.

There was something off in his reasoning, and she wasn't going to let it go unnoticed by Time.

"What about you, then?" Alice said sharply. "You could have denied Tarrant your help. You could have stayed out of this, couldn't you? But you didn't, Time. So if you say Tarrant and I are to blame, don't forget that you are as well."
A blue spark traveled from Time's eyes down to his neck like a tiny thunder.

The Second started to whimper like a pup.

"How dare you." He didn't raise his voice. Alice heard how the ticking of his clock-heart became irregular and louder, as if the hands moved with the blows of a hammer. "Thankless child. Once again, I meet only with ungratefulness. Mortals are always the same. Off with you, then. Get off my train and never return."

"I'm not leaving."

"You are."

"No."

"You cannot contradict Time!"

"ENOUGH!" Bim put himself between them and forced them apart. The Second trembled between his feet.

Alice and Time hit the walls in unison. They both had the same awed expression.

Bim glared at them, first at Alice, then at Time.

"You are both right, but you are also wrong." His voice broke midsentence in a manner that would have been comical in any other situation. "So what if you are all to blame, or if none of you are? What does it matter? Alice is here, Time is here, I'm here, but my uncle isn't! Isn't that what should we be worrying about? It'd better be, or else I'm the one who's leaving. Shukm, if I'd wanted to hear this sort of stupid debates, I would have stayed in Witzend!"

"Bim." Alice said calmly.

"No, Bim nothing." He exclaimed. He looked at Time again, who was still trapped between surprise and indignation. "Let's tell her everything now. I'll help you if I must, but if either of you start with those accusations again, I'm leaving. For good. I promise."

Bim bit his lip and stomp the ground with his feet. He acted with the same maturity of a kindergartner, but Alice couldn't reprehend him, not when she had just acted the same way.

Time must have shared her thoughts, and when he talked again, it was as if the argument had been put in an indefinite hiatus.

By the look he gave her, Alice knew Time would gladly continue that argument later.

She would be ready by then, but as for that moment, she would accept the truce and listen to what they had to say.

If not for Time, she would do it for Tarrant and Bim.

"Then, they found me." Said Time out of a sudden with a monotonous voice. It took Alice a moment to recapitulate where the story had left off. "None of the fools recognized me under my improvised but brilliant disguise. The meatball, the Bandersnatch and this young fool fell for it right away, but it took more effort to trick the rat, the dog and the rabbit. Luckily, the overgrown salad played her role well, and they felt more at ease once she agreed to all I said."

"Mally never believed it completely." Bim added. "She's always skeptical, I tell you. She whispered
in my ear not to let my guard down, but I was too impressed by the ridiculous new stranger to listen to her. He was the most interesting thing I had seen in years, and I wasn’t going to let her caution ruin the fun for me."

"One would think Time is more intriguing that a random man covered in red creepers." Alice observed. Time almost seemed to agree with her, but his pride was too wounded to express the sentiment, and Alice too angry to accept it.

"I guess you can say Time gets old real fast." Bim grinned. "Especially after you see him tea party after tea party."

"I exist to keep myself and space in order, not to be your clown."

"That's debatable." Bim sighed. "Take it as a compliment, Time. I think your acting skills are amusing, to say the least. You should have seen him play the mute fool, Alice. Funniest thing you'd have seen in your life."

"Mute?" Alice inquired.

"It was out of necessity." Intervened Time in an attempt to restore his image. "My face was hidden, and my clothes concealed by the creepers. But not even the stupidiest of that group would have failed to recognize my voice, no matter how much I tried to distort it. The stakes were too high to attempt it."

"You bet they were. And Time's voice is one of a kind." Bim said. "So instead of talking, do you know what he did, Alice? He danced! I thought the Futterwacken was silly, but Time's moves were on a whole new level. It seemed as if a tadpole had sneaked inside his pants and had gotten lost up north."

Bim laughed until his cheeks blazed. Time's face gained color too, and Alice wasn't sure if it was out of shame or anger.

She had to bit her lip to avoid clacking alongside Bim.

"Dancing is a good way to express oneself." Said Alice in an attempt to keep her laughter in check. "Drawing or signs could have done the job a little easier, though…"

"Don't be silly, child." Scoffed Time. "Your lack of knowledge of Underland's history baffles me. See, it wasn't always that the animals from Underland could talk, and in those days, Underlandians communicated with them by dancing. I can't say I regret that the spoken tongue prevailed, to be honest. My dancing moves can be too much for the mortal eye to appreciate."

"I wish I could see how everyone danced like fools in those days." Said Bim with his eyes filled with tears of laughter. "The past is such a funny thing. Is it the same in Upperland, Alice?"

"Of course n— " Alice bit her tongue. The memories of the dance she had shared with Hamish years ago in their failed courting attempt came to her mind. He had moved with the grace of conceited peacock with wo left feet. "Actually, it is very similar. You could say I danced with an animal not long ago."

"And how was it?"

"Dreadful."

"Are you sure you weren't dancing with Time?"
"Again, you fail to see the purpose behind my actions." Time complained. "Communicative dancing is not supposed to be graceful as much as it's meant to be practical. If the message comes across, then it doesn't matter how the messenger looks while delivering it."

"Right. Whatever you say." Bim rolled his eyes.

"It's a lost art in Underland. Not many people understand it outside the members of the royal family. I was lucky the green woman did." Time continued. "She translated the story about my new identity to the fools. I was Time no more, but just an old inventor who had gotten lost in the Castle of Eternity by accident long ago, and had just managed to find my way out after many years of wandering around those endless halls."

"I didn't cry when I heard his story for the first time. "Bim interrupted suddenly with a scream. "Alright, I did, but I only shed a single tear."

"As I was saying." Time pushed his head down and forced him to sit down. "My name had been lost to me, as well of who I had been before my tragic fate. All that I remember was my trade, and the many tricks I had learned after spending millennia trapped inside the castle. Once out, the fruit people had given me shelter and allowed me to live as one of their own, but Underland was not the place I remembered, and everyone I had once known was gone. Resenting my whole experience and regretting my misspent life, I decided to destroy the last memento of my grief: the grandfather clock."

"You really pour youy heart and soul into your background, didn't you?" Alice observed. "It almost sounds like the plot of one of the novels my sister is so fond of… Bim, are you crying?"

"I can't help it." He rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. "Time's story gets me every time. Poor non-existing inventor…"

"Naïve fool." Time nodded his head. "If only everyone in that group had been as gullible as him, they wouldn't have questioned my tale when I told them that the whole explosion and flash in the sky had been the result of the stored energy dwelling inside the clock. An energy that had exploded free when I finally destroyed it after many failed attempts."

"I told you, it was Mally who didn't buy it. And she made Bayard and Mc Twisp doubt you." Said Bim. "When they sent Mc Twisp to get the White Queen, I tried to stop them. I didn't want them to imprison this eccentric sod! He was too much fun. I spoke against it, but Mally convinced me otherwise with violence…. I mean, physical rhetoric. I don't think I have feeling in my earlobes anymore."

"And did your chatty dances fooled Mirana too? I don't I believe it."

"You are partly correct, kindergartner. It took all of the green leader's support for the Queen to trusts my charade. It was a challenge, but I must say that after so many days of having no other company than the Hatter and the fruit people, it was refreshing to deal with someone with some brains in her head. Yet, I still think the White Queen decided to believe my story not out of trust, but only out of convenience. What a lovely bunch that royal family is…"

"With all your respect, Time… but I doubt Mirana, or anyone for that matter, could be too interested in an old loon freshly out of a grandfather clock. "said Alice.

"I was." Reminded Bim. "Were I king, I would have made him the royal fool immediately."

"Mirana doesn't seem like the monarch interested in that, Bim." Alice said after a faint giggle.

"And if she was, she'd already have the Hightopp clan to fulfill that role." Time retorted.
"Fortunately, my comedic charm was the least of her concerns. She seemed much more interested in making sure the remnants of the grandfather clock were collected and sent to the Witzend castle at once. As a proof of amiability (or cowardice, I'm sure), the fruit people offered to help her by using the Kalamazoo to search for pieces that could have landed away from the castle. I still remember the cunning look in the Queen's eyes when she saw my marvelous creation, and I didn't expect anything less."

"Kalamazoo?"

"Yes, child. It's a cart I made for the fruit people when I was helping the Hatter build *The Wonder.*" Time explained. "That's the name he gave to the machine, though I'm still convinced *Axis Y* was a better name."

Alice swallowed. Hearing the name of her father's ships now given by Tarrant to the representation of all of his attempts to reach her made her smile.

It didn't go unnoticed by Time.

He cleared his throat before continuing.

"The Queen couldn't hide the admiration she felt for my machine. She demanded kindly, but not meekly, for the name of its creator. The multitude of green people mumbled like fishes with hooks stuck on their throats, their stupidity multiplied by their numbers, as if they were a mindless mob. Confused and not knowing what they should say, they all looked to their informal leader for an answer. She was so nervous that she almost spoils and rots at the spot. She gave me a quick glance of fear, and when the Queen asked again, she lifted her arm and pointed at me, earning me the attention of everyone."

"Mally whispered in my ear how she knew there was something wrong with the new stranger." Bim added. "Bayard and Mc Twisp agreed, but they seemed more interested in finding out more about him first. The Tweedle was wondering where Chess had gone to, and that was the only question that truly mattered, if you ask me."

"In that moment, I too envied the cat's vanishing abilities." Time said. "I almost wished the earth would swallow me too, as it had swallowed the Hatter and *The Wonder.* I'm not used to the burden of so many eyes fixed on me at once, not anymore. I felt as if the clock in my chest rusted with uncertainty when the White Queen approached me and asked if what they said was true, and if it was, how had I done it. I danced an explanation to her again, emphasizing the part of how I had learned many building tricks after wandering in the castle of Eternity for so long. Maybe she thought I was talking nonsense the first time I told her, but now that she could prove I could be useful, suddenly I was truly worthy of her attention. Monarchs."

"Send him to Witzend." Bim spoke with a high and over the top voice that sounded more like a chipmunk than a woman's. "Make sure he feels at home in the castle, and give him new clothes and all the food he requires. Attend to his needs, for it is the first time after so many years that Underland has a Royal Inventor. Tis' a day that will blah blah blah, I don't remember all she said, but I do remember how shocked were Mally and the others. They almost seemed against it, but I was happy. The fact that the dancing loon was soon to be my neighbor of sorts was too good to be true. I hugged the Bandersnatch by the neck and asked him if he could believe my good luck, and it answer by growling and spitting in my face. I assumed that it meant he was happy too."

"Why Witzend of all places? Did something happen to the Marmoreal castle?" Alice asked with concern.
"Nah. It's just that Witzend's castle is where the two Queens rule together now, or at least they try… and fail." Bim shrugged. "Or something like that, I don't really know. Politics are boring."

"So the queens are in peace?" Alice asked, dreading the answer after Time and Bim gave each other a stressed look.

"No one can ever be at peace with the Bloody Big Head." Bim said at last. "Not even her own sister. They act as if everything was fine, but it isn't. Then again, I can't do anything about it, so I don't worry or care too much."

"I see." Alice muttered.

She had believed that things would work out fine between Mirana and Iracebeth, but now she wondered if that was just a lie she had repeated to herself in order to not to worry about their fate.

Now that she could think about it in retrospect, she saw herself as a selfish and uncaring. She regretted her attitude, but Bim was right.

In her own world, what could she have possibly done for Underland? Her worrying about it would have changed nothing.

She had play a role in the sisters' reconciliation, but she couldn't control what happened beyond it, or how it would affect Underland.

If Iracebeth had really become a threat again, Mirana would have summoned her.

Since she hadn't, Alice concluded that maybe not everything was as broken between the royal sisters as the Underlandians thought.

Maybe fear and gossip was just their natural reaction to the redemption of a fallen tyrant.

It was understandable, and very possible.

In Upperland people also tended to overreact when confronted with that kind of news, especially if the Queen was at the core of the scandal.

Alice hoped so, though how much she believed it to be true was something she couldn't say for sure.

"Iracebeth, she's…” Time swallowed and looked away. "She's not an easy person to be around. In the castle, she would have seen through me eventually. She's the only person I could never fool. She knows me, not too well, but more than any other mortal ever has."

"How did you avoid her in the castle?" Asked Alice softly.

"I didn't." Answered Time. "I was never in the castle, child. The Bandersnatch rode me to Witzend with the coterie as my patrol, but they never managed to take me to the castle. The Queen would meet with us there later, but she first wanted to talk with the leader of the green folk. Knowing that it could take long, I slowed us down with every excuse I came up with: I was getting dizzy, I was about to pass out, my little borogove, though unconscious, couldn't stand so much speed and would have nightmares."

"The excuses meant nothing to us. We couldn't understand his dances, and he could barely dance while riding the Bandersnatch." Bim laughed. "We did stop whenever he began to splash like a fish out of water, if only to calm him down. Longest travel ever."
"My plan worked, obviously, and we reached Witzend at the same time the Queen did. It didn't take a translator for her to understand my dance of how scared I was of castles. A natural consequence of wasting most of my life trapped in one." Time said. "Reluctantly, she deemed it wiser for me to stay away from it, if it distressed me so much, and agreed to give me another place to stay. But there was a catch: I had to agree to remain in Witzend at all times."

"I offered him to stay at our family's home, but he rejected my invitation, the rude sod."

"The last thing I wanted at the moment was to be close to the hatter's kin. I'd had enough of their red-haired lunacy." Time said in his defense. "Besides, I wasn't some slacker looking for a resort to spend my vacations! I was trapped outside my realm and longed to go back to my own castle, back to Wilkins, my Seconds and the Grand Clock! I needed a way back, and knew that it was in the same place I had to avoid at all costs."

"Mirana's grandfather clock."

"Precisely."

"But it isn't in Witzend, it's in Marmoreal. That's where I first entered it, I remember it well."

"After the queens made peace, Mirana decided to move it to Witzend again, as a symbol of union and trusts between them." Bim spat with sudden disdain. "That's a load of shukm. I think she simply wanted to keep it well guarded so that the Bloody Big Head wouldn't have any funny ideas and try to visit Time again. We all know how well it turns out when those two meet."

"Bim." Said Alice with a frown.

"Leave him, child." Time ordered. "For once, he has the right to throw a jab. But don't make a habit out of it, lad. I will not take it kindly."

"Isn't that shocking." Bim retorted with bitterness.

Alice sensed the role of the pacifist would soon fall unto her shoulders.

It would be easier to appease Bim than Time.

She had noticed how Bim's mood worsened every time the conversation centered on the Queens.

Maybe she could still turn things around.

"Was your new lodging in Witzend of your liking, Time?" Alice commented with forced spontaneity. It sounded as false as Lady Ascot's laugh whenever an important Lord told an awful joke.

That cheerful thought made her cringe.

"Now it's me, " she said to herself as the silent tension between Bim and time grew, 'who wishes earth would swallow me."

"I'm pretty sure Tarrant wishes that too." Said a voice followed by a purr. "He longed so much to see you, but now that you're here, he is gone. It is as ironic as it is tragic, wouldn't you agree, Alice?"

Alice looked up and noticed the ominous smoke floating above her, like a cloud heralding a storm. It shaped shifted, and when Alice blinked, the cat's head and tail had acquired form.

"Chessur!" She greeted happily, and Bim imitated her with no less enthusiasm.
The cat floated down until it was just inches away from touching Alice's nose with his.

His eternal grin was widened to its limits.

"Glad to see you made it here in one piece, Alice. I was worried that the chaos of your summoning would follow you on your way down. Not that Underland is free of its own problems." He breathed a sarcastic chuckle. "Has it ever?"

He winked an eye before Bim grabbed his head and began to ruffle it.

"Chess, teach me how to vanish. Come on, it's not as if you have something better to do." Bim said. His knuckles revolted Chess' fur into a mass of knots.

"Not this again." Complained Chess before vanishing and repairing away from Bim, only for him to chase after the cat without a truce, the Second following them close by.

"Great, another meddler. Because I haven't had enough for one day." Time said while he watched along with Alice the disaster the other three caused in the wagon.

The chase stopped as abruptly as it had begun when Chessur materialized only his head in front of Time.

"I think I like your mute persona better." He said to Time without regard. "You better get into character soon, Time. You see, I came here not because I wanted. I'm not crazy enough to do that. I bring you a message from the White Queen, and for Bim too."

"What does she want?" Time sounded tired.

Bim mumbled something and pouted just like a child when play time is over.

"I didn't ask her. She needs you back at Witzend, that's all I know. Goodbye." Before disappearing, Chess looked at Alice. "Perhaps we'll meet again in Witzend, Alice. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone of your presence here... for now. Farewell."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Alice asked. She reached a hand towards the cat, but it went through a fading smoke that transformed into nothingness. She turned around and glared at the other two. "Mirana knows I'm here? Because something tells me my presence is not planned."

"When has it been, child?" Time went back to the controls and started the train. He was already wearing his heavy hat that covered most of his face. "Do you want to save the Hatter?"

The question took Alice by surprise, but the answer required little thought.

"Yes."

"Then what the queens want or know is irrelevant." Time stated neutrally.

Alice nodded, but Time didn't see her.

He then became so immersed in conducting the train that Alice felt no desire to distract him.

"He likes it, you know."

"Huh?"

"His lodging at Witzend." Informed Bim with the Second sitting on his shoulder.
Alice was surprised Bim remembered her question.

"You'll have to hide there for a while, just until Time and I are free to join you again. Don't worry, once we get to Witzend, I'll take you there without no one noticing. At least no one important."

"It's alright, Bim. Maybe I can find my way around if you tell me where it is. I know Witzend streets well enough." Assured Alice.

Bim scratched his chin and shrugged.

"If you say so. I'm not that good at stealth anyways. It's a shop."

"That's a little too vague, Bim."

"Mmm, how can I describe it to you. It's a bit old, with a door adorned with a multicolored glass. It's near King Oberon's statue. Inside, its walls are furnished with clocks, and I think there's a looking glass up the chimney. Alice, are you following?"

"Yes. I think I know that place, I've been there before."

"Really? Well, that makes things way more easy. But just to be sure, take the Second with you. You can tail him if you get lost. Just try not to follow him too closely; he attracts a lot of attention from the folk back home. They think it's cute, and I think they are dumb."

Bim laughed and ruffled the Second's feathers.

Alice spend the rest of the travel watching them in silence, with her thoughts constantly wandering towards Tarrant.

She didn't know how, but she'd find him.

And if that meant concealing her actions to Mirana and Underland itself…

Well, perhaps Time was right.

What they wanted or didn't know was not her priority, not until Tarrant was safe.

The train's whistle went off, and from the distance, Witzend became visible.

Alice peeked out from one of the wagon's window and gazed at it as the wind blew through her hair.

She realized there was no going back.

That was the only road ahead of her now.

If she was allowed to be honest, she wouldn't have preferred it any other way.

"Your Majesty—"

"I know, Mister Hightopp." Mirana put a hand on the man's shoulder. He had aged years in the last months. "Don't worry, I've called for Bim to come back at once. You know how fond he is of his job at the train."

Zanik rubbed his forehead and sighed.

"He's gone for days, and doesn't even let us know how he's doing." He complained under his breath.
"Is he well? Does he need anything? Nothing, not a single word from him."

"At his age, it's only natural to be a bit selfish."

"I know I'm the one who begged you to employ him. I thought that if you allowed him to be part of the Coterie, or let him work at the train, it would clear his mind off what happened to our family. But seeing how easily he distances himself from us, I think I made a wrong choice. He needs to be at home, with the family he has left."

"Mister Hightopp."

"First Tarrant runs away, and then Poomally disappears." He said with a broken voice. "I can't lose the lad too."

He wiped the tears escaping from his eyes. Mirana felt them as if they were their own.

"You won't." She said, holding his hand gently. Zanik swallowed his tears and quickly regained his sober expression. Mirana could see beyond his serious façade, but knew it was better to pretend she didn't. Zanik Hightopp, in pain or not, was a prideful man. "I'll see he returns home as soon as he arrives, I promise."

"Of course." Said Zanik in a whisper. "Thank you, your Majesty. I know my family has caused you much trouble through the years, but— "

"Enough. I will not accept apologies from the kin of the man that saved my life." Ordered Mirana. "At ease, Mister Hightopp, and don't lose hope. Bim will be alright, and my Coterie is still looking for Tarrant. We will find him, I promise."

Zanik nodded, but despair lingered in his face. Mirana knew that no amount of promises would bring comfort to the man, and decided it was best to dismiss him.

He complied silently and vowed before her.

She watched him walk heavily towards the entrance, and saw merely the shadow of the man he had been.

He stopped at the entrance and turned around.

"It's nearly ready, your Majesty." He announced without emotion. "Your sister's crown. I just must finish the final details."

"Excellent. Thank you." Mirana said with a small bow of her head. "Iracebeth will be pleased when she hears the good news."

The Queen noticed the phantom of hate in Zanik's eyes before it was concealed by formal stoicism.

"Yes." He answered. "I'm sure she will."

With that, he left.

Mirana stared at the entrance for a moment before returning to her duties. She approached the wall where the map of Underland hung, surrounded by a golden frame. It was adorned with small drawings of the Unicorn and the Lion fighting, each representing a different encounter.

It was one of the first creations of the Royal Inventor, but far from his most impressive.
She still couldn't believe that a man so skillful had remained away from Underland for so long. What a waste of potential, but at last she could make use of his talents to continue improving the life of her people.

Mirana joined her hands behind her back and inspected once more the new route she had planned for the train. She couldn't wait to tell the Royal Inventor about it.

Hopefully he'd agree without many complaints. She appreciated communicative dancing as an art, but was far from being fond of it as a way to express her ideas.

"Might was well practice." She sighed.

Though bothersome, she knew it was a small fee to pay in exchange for the Inventor's building abilities.

With dignified resignation, she danced, remembering her father's lessons and her mother's advice.

From an upper corner, Chess watched her in silence.

Below him, a pair of dark eyes were fixed on the dancing queen.

Their owner, clad in red, stomped away from the scene, with a Tweedle clumsily following her lead.
Dormouse's Schemes

Alice tripped twice as she tailed the Second. She was careful to keep her distance. It would have been easy to follow had the Witzenders not gotten in the way so often.

This time, it was a large group that surrounded the Second in the middle of the street.

Most of them were young children. They petted it, passing it along, and hugged it as if it was a puppy.

The most daring of them threw it into the air, only to catch right before it hit the floor. The rest laughed and clapped in amusement.

There were some adults among them too, most likely their parents. They were as bewitched with the little creature as the children.

"What a lovely borogove." One of them said. "They may be annoying in the wild, but they could make fine pets at home."

"If they are all as charming as the Inventor's, the Queens should make a royal decree for everyone to have one!"

"And they are pink! Though this one isn't. And pink is a nice color, is it not?"

"It is, it is." They chanted in unison like a herd of sheep.

Alice smiled.

It was good to see that the Witzenders had found bliss once more, despite the dark era that had loomed over their world for so long.

For all her happiness, the overwhelming presence of pink in the streets made her uneasy. It spread across every building like ink on paper. It was so abundant it was painful to look at.

The over-saturation made Alice's eyes water whenever she stared at it for too long.

"Ow."

It happened again.

She used her sleeves to wipe off the tears trapped in her eyelids. It took her only an instant, but when her sight was clear once more, the Second and the meddling group were gone.

"Great. Just what I needed."

She looked around for it in the market plaza.

It was overflowing with sellers and anxious buyers.

Soon the thought of reaching her destination on her own became tempting.

She knew how to get to Time's lair. If King Oberon's statue was still in the same place, then finding the way would come naturally to her. She'd only need to search for the correct memory and follow it.
In that aspect, losing the Second was just a minor inconvenience. True trouble would come when
she'd have to explain it to Time.

He would blame her.

Alice sighed as she pushed her way through the numerous Witzenders that didn't seem to mind her
presence. She wasn't in the mood for another of Time's lectures, and she feared she wouldn't be able
to keep her calm again.

Besides, she cared for the little Second. It was annoying and too cumbersome when it wanted to be,
but so were all pets to certain degree, and that didn't kept people from liking them.

Alice stopped amidst the endless flow of people, cod fishes and frogs that passed her by as if she was
a street light in the middle of the road.

Her eyes became watery again, but this time, pink was not to blame.

Dinah.

What fate had her kitten met?

Alice looked down. She could only hope it had been a gentle one.

She wished she could have done more, but knew she had done all that she could.

It was true, but not comforting.

"Cry not, child. You're Underland's Champion, remember?"

At first, Alice thought it was her conscience's voice echoing inside her ears. It must have been a long
while since she had last heard it, because Alice didn't remember it being so squeaky.

Most of the time, it sounded like herself.

Or had her voice always been so squeaky, and she had just noticed?

She cringed, and wished that it wasn't so.

"Wake up, Alice. You have much to do!" Said her conscience again, only that this time, the voice
came together with a sharp pricking in her earlobe.

Alice hissed in pain.

Partly relieved that the voice wasn't hers, but equally irritated by the uncalled attack, she looked
down to her shoulder and met a familiar face.

"You needn't hurt me to get my attention, Mally."

The dormouse grinned. She patted Alice's ear with little tenderness.

"This time, I did. You were so lost in thought that I thought you were gone for good. But let's not
speak here, it's too crowded. Come, follow me."

"It's alright, I know the-"

"Hush and do as you're told." Mally gave Alice no time for replies and jumped from Alice's
shoulders with the elegance of a warrior. Her feet made no noise when she touched the ground. "This way."

"I think I'm starting to know how Bim feels." She said to herself.

She went after Mally without truly following her lead at first. It wasn't until the streets became too similar and her memories to unreliable that Alice, with her pride slightly bruised, realized she indeed needed help to find Time's lair.

She had the small hope of bumping into the Second along the way, but it was nowhere to be seen. As long as no Witzender had come up with the brilliant idea of kidnapping it and claiming it as his or her own, it wasn't a big deal.

As it was the case with Dinah, Alice could only hope for it to be alright.

This worrying thought slowly faded from her mind and was replaced with the numerous new sights of Witzend.

She had been in the town before, but this was the first time that it felt real.

Visiting a place in the past, where she had been little more than a dissonance in time's perfect flow, felt like a made-up memory now that Alice had the chance to experience it again in the present.

The people, the smells, the sounds, the shops, and even the saturating pink. They formed a whole with which Alice could interact at her will, without fearing to doom all Underland to an eternity of rust in the process.

She wished Tarrant had been there together with her.

If something felt amiss, it was his absence.

That would change soon.

Alice would make sure of that.

"Over here!" Mally whistled to her from the entrance of an old clock shop. It was the same Alice remembered. "Hurry."

The streets in that part of town weren't as lively as the others. The sudden silence that surrounded the area almost seemed to emanate from King Oberon's statue.

The imposing King, now showing traces of wear and tear, was surrounded by bouquets of flowers. Pink.

Alice had always been neutral to that color, but now she was beginning to feel repulsed by it. She wondered what had been on Mirana's mind when she'd decided to soak all of Witzend in it.

Maybe, if she met her again, she'd ask her. Not from Champion to Queen, but from friend to a friend.

With Oberon's stony eyes lying on her back, Alice hurried to the clock shop's door. Her hand had just touched the knob when she caught something with the corner of her eye.

The orange glow of a lit hearth shone through the window of a nearby shop.

It was Tarrant's family business, just a few steps away from her.
Then, the shadow of a figure became visible as its owner stepped in front of the fire. She could only see his back. On his head rested a colorful top hat.

Alice froze.

The thought of investigating burned in her mind and tickled in her fingers.

"Alice!"

Alice closed one of her eyes, expecting the sting, but Mally kept her pin sheathed, unlike her sharp tongue.

"Why is it that someone always has to come and fetch you when you are needed?" Mally reproached Alice. She stood in her shoulder, so close to her ear that her whiskers tickled her ear. "You are not a child to get lost so often, Alice. You should be able to find your way on your own by now."

"I wasn't lost." Alice retorted. "I was distracted, it's different."

"Hardly." Mally sounded unconvinced. It took her a second to notice what had caught Alice's attention. Alice felt her sigh like a tiny breeze against her ear lobe. "It isn't him. Tarrant isn't there. I trust you know that."

"I do, but…"

"Forget it, Alice. There's no one there you should meet, not now at least."

"Are they alright?" Alice's concern, though sudden, was genuine.

She could only imagine how Tarrant's family were dealing with his absence.

The image of a family torn apart for so long, only to be reunited again and separated once more, wasn't too uplifting. She hadn't had the chance to meet them before, apart from the quick encounter she'd had with Tarrant's parents in the past.

It didn't matter what her bond with Tarrant was; for his family, she knew she was little more than a stranger, except for Bim.

She wished it wasn't that way.

She wished she had the chance to get to know them, or to meet them at least. If she did, she could give them her word that she would bring Tarrant back.

It was just a promise, but to a family touched by tragedy, every hope was welcome.

"Are they alright? You shouldn't ask questions to which you already know the answer, Alice." Mally's sarcasm couldn't hide her sadness. "If you are so curious, I'll tell you anything you want to know, but not here. Let's go to Time's lair, it's safe there. That's a sentence I never imagined myself saying."

Alice took breath to reply.

"Hurry now, before someone sees us." Mally hurried, and Alice had to let go of her newly catch breath in the form of a sigh.

Inside the shop, everything was the same as Alice remembered. But the more closely she looked, the more she discovered that nothing had stayed the same.
The walls were still adorned with clocks of all sizes and shapes, but now there twice as many than before. Their collective ticking was an agitating hum that resembled the buzz of many honeycombs. It was almost nerve-wrecking.

"I know it's annoying, but you'll soon become used to it." Said Mally. Her ears occasionally followed the rhythm of the clocks. "Only Time can find this soothing. I tried to convince him to get rid of them, but he didn't listen to me, as you can see."

"Oh, I see it. What I wish is that I couldn't hear it." Alice tried to cover her ears, but the muffled sound was just as annoying.

"It isn't ideal, but it's what we have now. We'd better make good use of it; besides, it's not as if we'll be here for long, Alice."

"Are we going to the Market Plaza again?"

"We are going to get Tarrant back. The two of us."

Alice put her hands down. She could still hear the ticking of the clocks, but she no longer listened to it.

Mally's words had forced it to blend into the background.

"Now, don't look so surprised." Mally frowned and put her hands on her hips. "You may be Underland's Champion, but Tarrant is my friend too. And you'll need my help, like you always have."

"What is going on, Mally?"

"You don't know? Didn't Time tell you? I should have known. He's as unreliable as ever!"

"He did. What I mean is…" Alice swallowed and leaned against the only portion of wall that wasn't covered with clocks. "Is it true? Is Tarrant gone because he missed me?"

Mally's eyes wide opened. Her body stiffened, but her voice wasn't as stern as before.

"It's true, Alice. You see, after you left, he spent most of his time sleeping. For a time, it was enough for him to look for you in dreams, but one day he just disappeared and…"

"Mally."

"I'm alright." Said the proud dormouse. "He wanted to see you again, not in memories or in dreams, but the true you. No…, it was more than that just seeing. He wanted to be with you."

"He could have summoned me." Alice said in frustration. "Mirana would have agreed. She has the power to bring me back, doesn't she? She could have send Mc Twisp, or Absolem, or any of you to guide me back. Why didn't Tarrant ask for her help? Why did he put himself in such danger?"

Alice shouted the last question. Her fingernails were dug deep into her palms.

Mally stood where she was, unaffected by the sudden outburst.

"Underland may seem to be at peace, Alice, but things are not what they seem." She said. "Mirana and Iracebeth rule together, but it's far from being a stable reign. I'm afraid our White Queen is too busy amending the mistakes of her sister to listen to her friend's needs, not even Tarrant's. And even
if she had called for you, how do you think the Bloody Big Head would have reacted? She would have gotten so furious that her big skull would have exploded. No, Tarrant was alone in his quest for you, both out of choice and necessity."

"I'm here now, am I not? If you needn't Mirana's help to bring me here, why didn't you summon me by yourselves before?"

"Simple."

Alice and Mally looked up and discovered an amused Chess looking at them from the roof. None of them knew for how long he had been there, or how much he had heard.

"They didn't bring you here earlier because the only one reason you are here now is because of me, dear Alice." The cat laughed. "But blame me not. It was Time's idea, and Mally's too. I was just a tool in their crafty machinations. If you must get angry, I shouldn't be your target."

"I wasn't going to put the blame on you, Chessur." Mally replied. "You cowardly cat."

"I didn't put blame on anyone, dear Mally. I just foretold the truth."

"Tell the truth to me then, Chess." Alice took a couple of steps towards him. "Because right now, I think you are lying."

Chess put a paw on his chest and closed his eyes.

"That hurts, Alice. I would never lie to Underland's Champion!"

"If you are so willing to lie to the White Queen, I don't see a reason why you shouldn't lie to me. Or does Mirana know you brought me back? Or that you are capable to summon me without her permission or help?"

Chess disappeared and materialized before Alice.

"Keeping things secret isn't the same as lying, Alice." He asserted. The look on his face, though not angry, took Alice for surprise.

Had she been a child, she would have been scared.

"It is for me."

James flashed in Alice's memory, but he faded just as quickly as Chess evaporated again, only to return to his former place on the roof.

"If I'm a liar, then you are a liar too. Mirana knows not you're here, so unless you tell her, you are the same as me."

It was a straight logic that Alice couldn't contradict, no matter how much she wanted to.

"You could have told him." She said in a whisper.

"I beg your pardon?" Chess put a paw behind his ear.

"If you had told Tarrant of your ability, and brought me back without bothering Mirana, before he tried to get to me on his own, he'd still be here."

Chess' smile vanished.
"Enough, Alice." Intervened Mally. "I know you're upset, but Chess isn't to blame. Tarrant never asked for our help, he just disappeared."

"Indeed, he just vanished." Said Chess. He looked at Alice, and she saw in his eyes that this time, he was truly offended. "Like we cowards do."

She took no pride in hurting the cat, and would have apologized had Chess not disappeared without saying anything else.

"I'm sorry." She said to Mally instead.

Mally didn't answer. Alice wondered how many of her friends she could anger in one day.

"It wasn't just that Mirana was busy. I think she would have refused to bring you back either way. We can't just summon you whenever we please, Alice." The dormouse sat on a shelf, tired but resolute. "I mean, we can, but we mustn't, not unless you are required…, whenever Underland is in danger. If we bring you here when it isn't, well…"

"What happens?"

"I don't know, but we are about to discover, because it's just what we've done. But something tells me it's not going to be pretty. Maybe we can inquire about it a bit. Tell me, Alice, how was your way down here?"

"I was on a train, in my own world, when suddenly- "Alice told Mally all about the accident that had almost ended with her existence in either world.

Going through those memories required a lot of Alice's energy, but she managed to give Mally the most detailed version she could.

The dormouse's face turned somber.

"Something tells me it could have gone smoother." Alice said. "I don't know, it's just a hunch. Not that my fallings into Underland have ever been subtle and relaxing. I'm either bumping my head into pianos or landing freefalls on my belly."

"I can't deny that." Mally conceded with a faint chuckle. "Still, this time you were hurt bad in your own world. It could have ended worse, much worse. It isn't the way it must be. I guess now it's my time to apologize, Alice. I knew the dangers of bringing you here the way we did, but I still agreed to it."

"What exactly did you do? How did you bring me here?"

"We all agreed to it. I, Time, Chess, and Bim." Mally sat down. Alice did the same. "You already met the lad, haven't you?"

"Yes. He's a decent chap."

"Oh, that he is, when he isn't getting into fights without a reason. Can you believe that once he challenged one of Mirana's veteran White Knights to a duel just because he thought it would be hilarious? And he was armed just with a spoon, under the advice of his newly self-proclaimed squire, Thackery Earwicket! He was lucky I was there to break the whole thing off, or else he would have ended up with more than just some scratches and bruises."

"I'm guessing he took that as an offense to his honor, got angry at you, and pouted about it for days."
"Is he really that predictable? Well, I guess he can't resemble his uncle on everything." Mally leaned over closer to Alice. "It's funny how that stupid boy is the one that convinced me to bring you here. But what is incredible is that he is made Time a part of all this. In that, he truly is Tarrant's nephew."

Alice raised an eyebrow, causing Mally to smile.

"When we discovered Time in Iracebeth's castle and he pretended to be a long-lost inventor, I saw through his lie right away. I thought I was the only one who did, and more than once I considered revealing his lie to Mirana. Had he not been my only lead to Tarrant, I would have exposed him without caring what became of him afterwards. Tarrant thought of Time as a friend, you see, for whatever reason. If he had run away from home, there was the chance he might gone to him. It was a farfetched idea, but Tarrant was nowhere to be found, and I was desperate enough to believe anything that may lead me to him."

Mally cleared her throat and continued.

"I never liked Time, and I began to resent him for how cynically he tried to deceived us. But I needed him; I needed to know what he was hiding. I planned to face him myself and make him confess everything before he became too settled in Witzend. But before I knew it, Mirana had become too impressed with his trinkets and creations, and named him her Royal Inventor. People around here became fond of him too, especially when he began to make their lives easier with whatever creations he came up with. They came to adore him, and even more when he began building the Train under the White Queen's command. Unknown stranger one day, eccentric celebrity the other!"

Alice was silent. Her ears had become accustomed to the clocks' melody.

Mally remained in the same position and scratched her whiskers.

"It took me every ounce of my patience and cunning to find the right moment to face Time alone. When he wasn't busy following Mirana's orders, he spent his free time by himself, locked up in this shop as if it was his sanctuary.

I still remember the night I managed to sneak in without that pesky Second-Borogove alarming him of my presence. I was trying to get Bim back home after our daily search for Tarrant, but the lad was too busy pestering Chess about teaching him how to vanish. He only stopped when he caught sight of the Second wandering carelessly in the streets; Bim let Chess go and scooped the machine in his hands instead, asking it if he wanted to fight just to kill some time."

"What a poor choice of words!" Alice exclaimed.

"Indeed. The Second took them literally and attacked Bim, who saw that as a formal acceptance to a duel. He began to kick and punch it, while he evaded the shots of black spit the borogove threw at him. I was about to stop that mess, but then it came to me that it was my chance. I turned my back on them and ran as fast I could towards the Inventor's shop, sneakad under the door. My heart was thumping in my chest... and then I found him.

He was sleeping on a throne he had built out of clocks and scrap metal. It looked awfully uncomfortable, but he was lost in sleep. He wasn't wearing the hat that concealed all his face. I had never fall for his trick, but my blood still boiled when my suspicion was confirmed true. My sight turned red, and without knowing how, I unsheathed my pin, leaped towards his face and stabbed him in his nose.

His scream was deafening, and for a moment, all the clocks in the shop ticked as if roaring. He tried
to slap me away from him, but I dodged his hand and jumped towards his eye. I told him to confess everything he was hiding, or else I would pluck his eye out as I had done with the Bandersnatch."

"No wonder Bim is so brash." Alice said. "With you as his role model, it's only natural."

"I was sick of Time's lies, sick of pretending to be happy about our new Inventor when I knew his tricks. Time refused to speak at first, and when he finally did, he simply scoffed, saying how it all was the Hatter's fault. I took that as a confession and told him to speak, but he claimed he had nothing more to say to a lowly rat like me. Had Bim not stormed into the shop that instant, I'd have a new, sky-blue trophy hanging from my belt."

The image came too vivid to Alice's mind. She bit her tongue, and found herself at the brink of speaking in Time's defense. Whatever his flaws, she didn't think he deserve to have an eye plucked out.

Knowing she would angry Mally, she kept that thought to herself, and was grateful for the fact the dormouse was her friend and not her enemy.

"Oh, Hi Mally." Mally said with a poor but recognizable imitation of Bim. "Hi Time, I mean Sir Inventor. Your borogove is a worthy opponent, we agreed to have a rematch someday soon. Are you two fighting too? Can I join in?"

"He knew all along?" Asked an incredulous Alice. "I don't know what surprises me the most: how perceptive or how uncaring he is."

"I know how you feel." Scoffed Mally. "I ordered him to shut the door behind him and put the bloody borogove down. He shrugged and did as I told him, and then he asked Time if he could try his stupid, big hat on. I swear, that lad is just…"

"Like Tarrant?"

"He is." Mally almost smiled. "Time took the chance to get me off of him and stand up. He tried to attack us, maybe freeze us in an eternal second again, but Bim stopped him. No fair, you can't use your timely tricks! Okay, you can, but only if you teach me how to use them first. Come on, say yes. I jumped to the boy's chest and forced his mouth shut. Silence, Bim, I told him, worried sick about him. But somethign in the boy's name took Time aback, and instead of cursing us, he just backed down and told us to leave. Bim and I, of course, disagreed. I told Time he had no right to ask us anything, while Bim assured him that we wouldn't tell anyone of his identity. He said that would take the fun out of it all. For Time, that seemed reason enough to put his defenses down."

"Whatever his motives, I'm glad Bim brought a more peaceful resolution the matter." Alice said. "What a hero, bringing peace by seeking fights."

"Aren't heroes tall he same? And please, never tell Bim that, or his head will become as big as Fracebeth's." Mally rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"My sarcasm must be rusty." Alice said to herself. "And then what? Did you, Time and Bim became best friends and dance happily around a dodo in a Caucus Race?"

Mally gasped in surprise.

"Even worse! You won't believe what happened next: Time asked for our help! Well, something of the sort… more like we reached an agreement. He began to rant about how much he wanted to go back to his own castle, about how sick he was of being in Witzend surrounded by naïve fools. Bim laughed at him, and told me how Time or Sir Inventor was the best thing that happened in Underland
in a long time, and how he wouldn't allow anyone to deprive him of such amusement.

I scolded him for his childishness, and reminded him that Time knew of his uncle's whereabouts. Bim's eyes gleamed, and when he asked Time if that was true, he almost screamed of excitement when Time confirmed my words. Where is he? Is it somewhere fun? Can you take me there too? *Come on, say yes!*

Alice grunted, unsure if Bim was searching for Tarrant out of concern of his uncle, or just to amuse himself.

That was another trait he and Tarrant differed in.

She felt her affection for Bim squander.

"When Time spoke again, his voice sounded as crafty as relieved. He assured the boy he could send him where his dear uncle was, under the condition that we helped him back into his realm and promised never to disturb him again. Bim dreaded the idea of Sir Inventor leaving Witzend, but changed his mind once Time convinced him that the place where Tarrant is was the most interesting place to ever exist.

I'm sure Bim saw through the lie as clearly as before, but for him, any place seems better than old boring Witzend. Once he agreed, I had no choice but to follow him into Time's deal: we would find a way to get Time close to the grandfather clock inside the castle without alerting the Queens, and in exchange, he would leave behind a way for us to get to Tarrant. I added one more condition to the deal, and I'm sure you know what that was, Alice."

Mally looked at Alice right in the eyes.

"He'd have to bring me here...without Mirana knowing," Alice slurred the words.

Mally nodded.

"It doesn't make me proud to admit it, but I knew that if I wanted to succeed in this derrand, I'd need your help. Time knew of a way to summon you. He said it was common knowledge easily found on old books, if one knew how to read them correctly."

"By using Chess?"

"Yes. Chess can't materialize his body in your world, but with Time's help, he can send some of his thoughts and lure you to an entrance Time would activate. As far as I know, it's just like when Mc Twisp guided you twice to the rabbit hole, or when Absolem led you through the looking glass; both were entrances that Mirana had opened for you." Mally laughed with bitterness. "Chess lured you by taking over the mind of your kitten, and Time brings you by using a grandfather clock... we aren't exactly gaining points in creativity, are we? Had it been me, would I have guided you through a hole in the wall?"

"Nobody guided me the first time I came here. I chose to follow Mc Twisp." Alice said with a touch of pride. "And why didn't Mirana know about this before? I understand the others didn't, but she's always been so resourceful and wise..."

Mally demanded silence with a gesture of her hand.

"If you want to argue about it, ask her in person. I barely understand it, to be honest. Or you also can ask Time, if you have the... time, but he'll either leave you with more questions than answers, or bore you to death. Though judging by how chaotic the whole thing went, I bet he didn't know what he
was doing at all."

"In that case, I think an ignorant existence is preferable." Alice didn't discard the idea of asking Time, but it was far back in the line of her priorities.

"That almost sounded wise. Don't forget the almost."

Neither laughed at the jest, but both Mally and Alice accepted it as a peaceful end for their conversation.

Alice's head was filled with questions. She longed to ask them all to Mirana, but now she doubted if meeting her again was a good idea in the first place.

She may be Underland's Champion, but Mirana was the rightful Queen. Alice's presence in Underland when she hadn't allowed it could be taken as a great offense. And even if Mirana proved more merciful and understanding than usual, Iracebeth's poisonous tongue would cause trouble one way or another other.

If the deception had been only against the Red Queen, Alice would have found it adventurous, but when it came to deceive Mirana, it felt treacherous.

Perhaps it would be solved once she had brought Tarrant back to Witzend. Mally would speak in their favor, and Chess too, if he felt like doing so. Alice also hoped the Hightopp would show their support.

At the very least, Bim would do so.

Alice shook her head. She was planning too far ahead.

Tarrant came first.

"Get ready, Alice." Mally unsheathed her pin and sharpened it with one of the metals pieces laying around. "Once Time arrives, that's where our quest for Tarrant begins."

"Unless you have a Vorpal Sword in your pocket, I'll have to go weaponless." Her arms had become a bit stronger after going back to the sea (as her victories against Harper in arm wrestling proved it), but Alice doubted that would be enough to venture into whatever danger lied ahead.

Mally grunted and looked around.

"There! You can use that for now." She pointed behind her.

When Alice discovered it, she felt like hitting Mally in the head with it.

"This is a spoon."

"If Bim could make a weapon out of it, so can you. If it displeases you so much, you can sharpen your mind instead."

"How nice, Mally." Alice said with her mouth twisted and putting the spoon in her pocket.

Mally laughed, and Alice joined her.

They stopped abruptly when someone knocked at the door. Alice could see a slim, tall figure behind the tempered glass.
Mally's ears flattened. She dashed towards the door, pin in hand.

"Who's there?" She demanded.

The figure outside remained quiet and knocked again, this time with so much strength that a fissure appeared in the door's glass.

It left as suddenly as it had arrived, after getting no answer from the inside.

Alice was still tense, as if expecting the stranger to return.

"Who was that?" She asked with her mouth dry.

"Probably some fool too eager to see what new creation the Inventor has come up with." Mally slowly stepped back, her gaze fixed on the door. "Let's not worry about it, he's gone. With luck, Time will be here soon, and then we'll be gone too. Anyway, Alice, you can relax now."

The crashing sound of shattered glass drowned Mally's words. Like a cannonball, someone had jumped through the shop's window, hugging his legs and hiding his face between his knees.

Alice barely had time to move out of his way.

The stranger landed next to her, on top the hundreds of glass pieces that had once been a colorful window. He got up as if he had just woken from a nap on a comfortable bed.

After dusting shards off his clothes, he looked at Alice.

Alice stepped away from him, but stopped when she noticed the hat adorning the stranger's head. He was also holding something in his arms.

The Second looked at Alice and ticked.

"Did your manners take a vacation? How dare you enter like this…" Mally was already standing in front of Alice and the stranger.

She gasped and put down her weapon when the stranger, far from being scared, smiled and doff his hat at her.

"Oh, it's you." She spoke not with anger, but with resignation.

Without a warning, the stranger dashed towards Alice, almost stepping on Mally, and held the feathered Second so close to her face that she sneezed twice.

"The borogove said I should bring it here, but the door was closed, so I used the window. Doors now seem unnecessary, don't you agree, Alice?" He asked. "You are Alice, right? I can't remember if you are, but if I could, I would remember you. Tarrant would, but I'm not him. Do you know what I mean? Because I don't."

"Uh?" It was the most eloquent thing Alice could think of.

"I like you answer very much." He said in convincement, still holding the Second on Alice's face.

"Enough of that, you." Intervened Mally.

"Which you? You me or you you?" The stranger's voice was agitated, as if his own life depended on
that dilemma.

"You know what I mean."

"I do? Bliss, what a relief!" He grinned and threw the Second into the air to celebrate his regained peace of mind. After three successful throws, he let the Second fall flat on the floor, his attention fully fixed in Alice again. "I saw you before, and you saw me too. Tarrant wanted to see you too, but now he's gone, but you're here. Tarrant…. Have you seen him, Alice? Have you?"

"Calm down, Pimlick. Alice is here to bring your brother back." Said Mally from Pim's shoulder "Isn't it true, Alice?"

Alice glared at Mally.

She would have preferred to reveal that information herself, but she mellowed when her eyes met with the expectant eyes of Tarrant's brother.

The resemblance was more akin to the father, but if Alice looked with more caution, she could see traces of Tarrant dispersed on his face. That alone was enough to strengthen her resolve.

"I will. I promise you."

"Callooh-Callay! Alice's here! I'll tell everyone of your return." Pimlick said while jumping out of joy. He jumped his way towards the door, almost stepping on Mally again. "Alice's back! Alice's back!"

The dormouse and Alice shared a quick glance before they both hurried and held back Pimlick before he managed to leave the shop. Alice held him from the shoulders, while Mally climbed up to his nose.

"Hush! No one should now she's here, do you understand?" Mally explained with a tone more patient than she had ever used with Alice.

"Why? Is it wrong for her to be here? Am I involved?"

"Pimlick, this must be a secret. Maybe you can be the herald of her return later, but not now."

"It's wrong, isn't it? Now I know, and the Bloody Big Head will behead me, and my family too." He began to struggle to break free. Alice's arms burned as she tried to calm him down, but her attempts were as successful as Mally's soothing words. "BLOODY BIG HEAD, BLOODY BIG HEAD! EARTHQUAKE, LITTLE ANTS!"

"Enough, Pimlick!"

"BLOODY BIGH HEAD!"

Soon Alice's biggest problem wasn't that Pimlick would manage to escape, but that he would attract a curious mob of Witzenders to Time's lair.

Her quest hadn't even begun, and yet it was already close to come to an end.

Amid the ticking clocks and Pimlick's screams, the Second ran around Alice's feet, unaware or uncaring of the chaos he had created.
"No."

"It was an order, not a petition. If you don't agree, you'll leave me no choice but to assign one of my White Knights as your escort, Bim."

"I'm not going back home; I did nothing wrong!" Bim yelled. "If you don't believe me, ask the Inventor. I've been working in the train, not stealing someone else's tea cups. Tell her, Inventor. Tell her!"

A gelid silence fell upon the room after Mirana stood up. Bim flinched the same way he did when Mally pricked one of his earlobes.

The Inventor remain still, unaffected by the boy's rage or the Queen's authority. Mc Twisp was standing next to the Queen. He muttered several "Oh dears" as he watched the scene with morfication.

"Your family needs you." Mirana said to Bim, who dared not look her in the eyes. "That's why you must go back to them. If you don't, then you will be doing something very wrong, Bim. Zanik is worried about you, everyone is."

"No. Do not ask me again." Bim's face was crimson. "Now if you excuse me, I have stuff to do. Be well, your Majesty."

He gave a lax, if not mocking, reverence to Mirana. The Inventor turned his head to look at Bim, but he quickly lost interest in him.

Just before Bim could reach the entrance, Mirana's threat was fulfilled. Looming behind his back like his shadow, a White Knight grabbed Bim by the arm.

The display shamed Mirana, but Bim had left her no choice.

He was destructive and bold when angered. If he wanted to leave the castle, it would be with a White Knight following close behind.

Otherwise, he wouldn't leave at all.

As much as Mirana wished, there was no other alternative.

"Bim, it doesn't have to be this way. Just go home." Mirana said. "Please."

Before Mirana could decipher the changes in Bim's face, a hand clad in red broke the White Knight's grip on the boy.

Iracebeth's presence had been so sudden that it almost matched Chess's appearing skills. The Inventor became tense, his shoulders moving at the compass of his quickening breathing.

Mirana couldn't blame him.

The presence of her sister had startled her too.

"What one Queen forbids, the other allows." Iracebeth roared as if she was speaking to a multitude about to rebel. "Leave, boy. Leave knowing you have your Red Queen's permission to do so."

Bim stared at her.

His face, moments ago red like blood, was now as white as Mc Twisp's fur. He did as Iracebeth told
him, running so fast that he tripped as he crossed the entrance.

When Iracebeth let the White Knight go, he grabbed his arm and grunted in pain before Iracebeth ordered him to get out of her sight.

"What?" Iracebeth asked to her sister, who gave her a killer glare. "We rule together, don't we?"

She laughed and left, with her loyal Tweedle following her lead.

Mirana felt anger surging within herself. If Mc Twisp and the Inventor hadn't been there, she and Iracebeth would have engaged in an argument no less conflictive than a sword duel.

What stung the most was that Iracebeth was right.

They ruled together now.

Mirana was beginning to understand its meaning.

She wasn't sure she liked it.

"Your Majesty?" Mc Twisp meekly pulled from her dress.

"Let us move on. I'll talk to her later." Mirana said. "You know what you must do know, Mc Twisp."

"I know. I'll make sure the preparations are ready. It'll be a great ceremony." Mc Twisp bowed his head to her and to the Inventor, who didn't answer, as usual.

She danced an order to him, letting him know she was no longer in the mood to discuss the train's expansion after the little scene Iracebeth had caused.

The Inventor didn't reply, and instead, he walked towards the entrance so fast he outran Mc Twisp.

Mirana gave little thought to it. Her mind was too plagued with Iracabeth's impertinence.

She sat on her throne again, waiting for the idle hours to cool her temper before the ceremony.

It had been Mally's idea.

What better way to celebrate the Inventor's improvements to Underland than with a celebration where all Underlandians would be present?

Even a reserved man like him could find some joy in a public homage worthy of a hero.

Not even Alice, Underland's Champion, had been celebrated in such way. Most Underlandians didn't know how she looked like, and her legend extended to her actions only.

Mirana smiled at the memory of her friend, and wondered if she would have to summon her again if Iracebeth's impertinence evolved into something viler.

She missed Alice, but she wished it wouldn't come to that.

All that she wanted was for her and her sister to rule together in peace.

Perhaps it wasn't as much a simple wish as she had thought.

The image of a crown came to her mind.
Once it rested on her sister's head, everything would get better. She had to believe it.

That was the true reason why she had agreed to Mally's idea.

It would not only be a ceremony, it was also a crowning. And, if everything turned out alright, it was also the start of Underland's new age.
AN: So, here I am. It took me a while, but I finally brought myself to write this. It's been a while since I last written anything, but I hope it's good. You have no idea how thankful I am to everyone reading this. This story belongs to all of you :)

Anyway, thanks for reading! I will try to write the continuation, so bear with me as you have done these past 3 years!

Alice grabbed Pimlick's wrists and tied them behind his back. She tied them tightly, but not without tenderness.

She didn't want the rope to dig into his skin and make him bleed.

As much trouble as he had caused them, she couldn't bring herself to resent him. A part of her felt bad for him, and a bigger part felt ashamed of what she was doing.

"He almost steps on me." Complained Mally as she finished covering Pim's mouth with a handkerchief. "I know he didn't mean to, but that wouldn't make me any less dead if he had done so."

"Are you sure we should leave him here like this? Shouldn't we take him to his family?"

"Of course we should, but we can't." Mally made sure both her and Alice's knots were tight enough and then she jumped onto Alice's shoulder. "You heard how loud he gets. We wouldn't be able to take him home without half of Witzend knowing you are here. Let him rest for now, we'll find a way to calm him down and take him to his family once he wakes up."

"I have the feeling that could take a while." Sighed Alice. The favorite Second rubbed against her leg. She picked it up and stared at the newly gained dent on its forehead. Alice patted it as she would a scared kitten. "I'm sorry, little guy. I had to improvise."

"You did well, Alice." Said Mally in her ear. "Maybe a little too harshly, but you reacted well."

"Knocking my friend's brother by hitting him on the back of the head with a metallic borogove." Said Alice with feign pride. "Just another day in the life of the hero of Underland."

"Well, you don't have to put it like that…"

The lights flickered and the clocks covering the walls stopped ticking. The Second escaped her grip and ran to the door, jumping in excitement just before Time entered the store.

He closed the door behind him and removed his gigantic, elaborated hat. Once his face was uncovered, he rubbed his eyes with his fingers and clumsily stumbled towards a table covered with metallic scraps and gears.

"How I hate to play the fool with the queens. They always find a way to give me a migraine." He complained as he searched for something with his free hand. The Second jumped on the table and...
helped its master find a small bottle full of oil.

Time smiled, swiftly patted the Second and poured all the oil on the back of his head. His gears stopped creaking and little puffs of steam ceased to form.

Alice almost laughed at Time's face of relief, but her amusement vanished when he opened his eyes and gazed directly at them.

"So, Alice, what do you think of my new…" His mouth froze. The empty bottle slipped from his fingers and crashed against the floor, shattering into dozens of pieces.

Alice's heart skipped a beat, and she barely had time to move out of the way before Time pushed her out of it himself.

"What…What in the name of the hours, the minutes and the seconds is this?!" Screamed Time as he pointed at the broken window and Pimlick, who was now snoring and deeply lost in what seemed to be a pleasant dream.

"Leave him to me." Mally whispered Alice. She went from her shoulder to the top of her head. Her feet tickled Alice and almost succeed in making her smile, but Time's angry gaze neutralized any desire to laugh.

*I'm counting on you, Mally.* Thought Alice, wary but overall confident in her friend's capacity of cooling Time's temper.

Mally cleared her throat and took a deep breath.

"Alice did it."

"What?!" Asked Alice and Time in unison, the former bewildered, the later so furious that's his blue eyes almost turned white.

"It's true." The dormouse shrugged. "Well, not the window. That was Pimlick, and in Alice's defense, he was causing an uproar. She had little time to think, and I'm sure she didn't mean to dent the Second's forehead when she used it to knock Pimlick out."

"What?!" Repeated Time as he quickly scooped the Second in his arms. Once he realized that everything Mally said was true, he looked at Alice as if his eyes were daggers.

"Thank you, Mally. That was really helpful." Said Alice bitterly. She then directed her attention to Time. "Look, I'm sorry. I just … I panicked, I guess."

Time grunted and looked back at Pimlick, who in dreams mumbled something about pastries and tea trays.

Alice braced herself for another one of Time's rantings, but he simply closed his eyes and went to a sofa near the door, where he collapsed in exhaustion.

"I do not care. That family and the queens give me nothing but grief." He laid his head against the sofa. The Second jumped on his lap and ruffled its glued Borogove feathers, preparing itself for a good rest in the company of its master. "Just get him out of here as soon as you can. The last thing I want or need is to deal with another Hightopp. The hatter and the boy have been more than enough, I assure you."

"By the way, where's Bim?" Asked Mally from Alice's shoulder. "I thought you two would come
back together from the castle."

"How should I know? I'm not his babysitter." Said Time, putting his hands behind his head and crossing his legs. "He ran off somewhere. He'll be back, don't worry."

"What do you mean by he ran off? Did something happen in the castle?" It was one of the few times Alice had seen Mally honestly concerned. Her intuition told her something was wrong, but she kept her doubts to herself, deciding it would be best to wait for Time to say more before she voiced her own worries.

Indifferently, Time explained how angered and upset Bim had been when Mirana ordered him to go back home. His voice only wavered when he mentioned Iracebeth, and how she had allowed Bim to leave the castle against his sister's wishes.

Alice couldn't believe it at first. It still felt unnatural for her to think of the Red Queen as an ally, or at least a neutral party. Alice doubted that feeling would ever change, and she couldn't help to wonder if Iracebeth had helped Bim out of genuine sympathy for the boy, or just to spite Mirana.

Does it matter? Alice thought, and found out she didn't know the answer to that question either.

"Oh, Time." Said Mally as if she was a mother scolding her child. "Why didn't you go after him? You know how brash and unpredictable he is, even more when he is angry!"

"Like I said, I'm not his babysitter. Looking after him is mother's job, not mine..." Time dropped his relaxed posture and looked at Alice and Mally. Alice caught a glimpse of regret in his expression, but it vanished as soon as it had appeared. "I was tired! I am tired! I didn't want to deal with the lad, I just wanted to come here and rest. See how well that is turning out."

"You, you..." Growled Mally, unsheathing her pin.

"Wait, Mally." Interrupted Alice. "Fighting Time, or even getting angry at him will not help us find Bim. Besides, Bim is young but he isn't a little child. I'm sure he can look after himself- "

"No, Alice. He can't." Although Mally withdrew her weapon, her fierceness lingered. "I love the boy, and he is kind and good at heart. But what Iracebeth did to him, to his family... It changed them all, Alice. You've just seen what it did to Pimlick, as for Bim... he is far too reckless for his own good. We have to find him, before he does something stupid."

Alice nodded, regretting talking so freely about things she hardly knew.

"Alright, let's focus on finding him for now." She stated.

"You would so easily forget your search for the Hatter, Alice?" Asked Time.

Alice flinched. She knew Time hadn't asked it out of malice, but his question still touched a nerved and awakened her temper.

"No, of course not! There's nothing I wish more than going after Tarrant!" She exclaimed at Time. "But if Bim needs us, we must find him. That's what I want to do... that's what Tarrant would want us to do."

"Yes." Agreed Mally. Gently, she caressed Alice's ear. "Thank you, Alice."

"Curse you." Time got up abruptly. The sleeping Second bounced against the floor and landed near Alice's feet. "You think I can't see what you're trying to pull here? Alice, queen of the moral high
ground, and Time, the mean old grump with the heart of ice. How puny and petty he is. That's what you think of me, isn't it?"

"What?" Asked Alice, hardly keeping track of what Time was saying. "No, I…"

"Well, it's not going to work, and you know why? Because old mean Time will help you, but not because of your emotional manipulation, but because you are not holier-than-me Alice, and neither is the mouse."

"But if you're helping me only to prove that, wouldn't that mean I succeeded at manipulating…?" Alice stopped talking thanks to Mally, who gave her a small pinch in the ear with her pin. "I mean, your reasoning makes perfect sense, Time."

"As it always does." He agreed with pride. "Then we better get going. Most of Witzend must be sleeping by now. We won't be spotted if we are careful."

More excited than nervous, Alice prepared to venture outside.

Mally jumped from her shoulder and did the same. She found a small piece of steel and began to sharpen her pin with it.

As for Alice, she took one of the many leather bags Time had scattered all around and searched for provisions, but soon she discovered Time had no kitchen in his house, even less food.

"It was worth the try." Alice said to herself, a little disappointed. Her stomach grumbled, and her imagination filled her mind with images of the most exquisite food.

"Child, come here."

Time's voice destroyed her culinary fantasy. She went to him with little enthusiasm.

"Yes?"

"Here, put this on. I made it myself." Time said as he put a pitch-black cloak around Alice’s shoulders. It was made of a fine and soft silk. "It may help you keep your identity covered. It will also give you protection, but don't overdo it, it isn't any kind of armor. Just to be clear, this isn't a gift, I'm simply lending it to you, so you better make sure to return it to me undamaged, do you understand? Also, it will keep you warm. Nights are cold in Underland."

"Thank you, Time."

Time opened his mouth, but he said nothing. Instead, he shooed Alice away with a wave of his hand.

"So much for courtesy." Alice laughed mockingly.

"Courtesy saves time, but he isn't the one that needs saving right now." Added Mally abruptly from Alice's shoulder. "Come on, the sooner we find Bim, the sooner we can go after Tarrant. Let's be on our way!"

Somewhat childishly inspired by Mally, Alice made sure the cloak's hood covered her face before she rushed to the door.

She was just one step away from it when a thought halted her steps.

"What about Pimlick?" She looked over her shoulder. The man slept peacefully, with a thin thread of drool streaming from his chin and fading into his beard. "We can't just leave him tied here all alone."
Mally grunted, annoyed by the interruption.

"We'll search for Bim until dawn, and whether we find him or not, we'll come back here and free Pimlick before midday."

"Alright." Said Alice, unconvincing but unwilling to waste more time. "Let's go, Time."

"Don't rush me, child. I go at my own pace." He stated. His face was again covered behind his elaborated hat. "And to think I once thought this would be a peaceful day."

"You should know better by now." Answered Mally once the three of them were outside.

"I know better than everyone, mouse." Said Time. "And yet here I am with you, am I not?"

"And why is that, I wonder?" Added Alice.

"I'm not sure child." Admitted Time. The moon and a thousand of stars showered them with their light. "I'm not sure."

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Chess had been dreaming of a kitten and a man before being rudely stripped from his own dream by an interloper.

"Who?" He grumbled as the stranger carried him in his arms across the train's wagons. With his eyesight still blurry from sleep, he had to rely on his nose to identify him. "It is almost considered a crime to wake a cat from his nap, Bim. How about we leave your little games for tomorrow?"

Silence.

Chess frowned and rubbed his eyes. It wasn't like Bim to remain silent.

"Bim?" He repeated, trying to conceal his concern behind a mocking grin. "Are you trying to be interesting by pretending to be mysterious, lad?"

Bim remained unresponsive. Chess had just noticed Bim's eyes were swollen and red before he threw him off the train by an opened window.

He floated erratically for a few moments before he regained his sense of balance.

Angered by Bim's impertinence, Chess tried to teach him a lesson. Maybe a scratch or two would do the trick. He unsheathed his claws and dashed towards the boy, who gazed at him from behind the opened window.

"Leave, Chess." Said Bim without emotion. Chess' paw stopped right before his claws managed to touch his skin.

"What are you-"

"Leave and don't tell anybody you saw me."

His anger turned into bafflement.

"Bim…"

The boy didn't wait for Chess to end his sentence and closed the window.
Chess floated still in the same spot for what it felt like hours, worried about Bim and yet too intrigued to interfere in what was unfolding in front of him.

Before he realized, the train started to move, and soon it was out of sight, riding the rails at a speed Chess knew was way faster than usual.

"Well." He said, unsure of how much he appreciated or regretted being witness of that scene. "That happened. But worry not, young Hightopp, I won't tell anyone I saw you. That I won't."

Chess began to float away, thinking of what place could be as warm and comfortable to sleep as the conductor's cabin.

"That I won't." He said again, with the image of Bim's eyes burning inside his mind. "That I won't."

Her stomach growled louder than it had ever done before in her life.

Alice was relieved the cloak and the predominant darkness concealed her blushing cheeks.

"Silence, Alice!" Chided Time from afar.

"It's not as if I can help it." She retorted.

"Then you should have foreseen it and eaten something before we left the shop."

"And what would you have me eat there? A salad of metal scraps glazed with oil sauce?"

"That does sound delicious." Agreed Time.

"Maybe for you, but I think my stomach would find it more fatal than tasty."

"Hush, both of you." Said Mally.

They were at the outskirts of Witzend, and except for a couple of lovers giggling as they hid from their parents in the streets and one merry drunk singing nonsense outside a pub, nobody had seen them pass.

"There." Mally pointed at a nearby forest. "Bim sometimes goes there to train his swordsman's skills. It could be a good place to start."

It was a short walk. Once they were in the forest, they felt free to speak louder. Mally was particularly bold, as she started screaming Bim's name with all the power of her lungs.

Alice imitated her, but she kept her voice at a volume she considered prudent.

Time didn't shout, and his searching attempts didn't go beyond moving an occasional branch out of his way and looking under rocks.

"He isn't here." He said as he put a pebble back in its place.

"Did you search well?" Spat Alice.

"Yes! Wait, let me check again." Said Time, lifting the pebble and inspecting every blade of grass.

Alice rolled her eyes and smile fondly.

That was something Tarrant would do.
Her heart sunk to her feet.

*Wait for me, Tarrant.* She thought, a lump forming in her throat. *We'll see each other soon, I promise.*

Another grumble, louder than the one before, echoed across the forest.

"Okay, it was amusing the first time, but now it's just annoying, Alice." Scolded Time.

"Enough of that, Time."

"He is right, Alice."

"Not you too, Mally."

"Here, come with me." Mally guided her to a couple of bushes. "The berries on the bush on the right are really tasty, but they will leave your stomach empty. The ones on the bush on the left taste like schmuck, but they will leave your belly full."

"Nothing is ever easy and simple here, is it?" Alice sighed, thinking how she would never take a normal apple for granted again.

"What do you say? It seems simple and easy enough for me. Anyway, hurry up and eat. Bim is somewhere around here, I can sense it." Said Mally before running off to continue her search for Bim.

Alice picked berries from the bush on the right first. The flavor was new to her, but tasty nonetheless. She ate handfuls of it and wouldn't have considered eating from the bush on the left had her stomach not growled again.

Gathering enough courage, Alice picked a single berry, chewed it and swallowed before her tongue had the chance to taste it.

It didn't work, and the aftertaste that lingered in her mouth threatened to make her sick.

"At least it feels as if I had eaten a generous dinner." Said Alice, grateful to the berry for filling her stomach but determined to never taste one again in her life. "I better go back to Time and Mally before they-"

Another growl.

It had to be a joke.

The growl continued.

It wasn't coming from her stomach, but from a beast glaring at her from behind the bushes.

She had no time to react before the beast leaped at her, its weight stealing all the breath from her body.

From underneath the best, Alice saw how the panicked Second that had been watching her as she ate fled from the scene at full speed.

She looked up and saw a set of white, sharp teeth so close to her face they almost touched her skin.

Fear overwhelmed her when that gigantic mouth opened. She closed her eyes, expecting the fateful
bite, but all she received was the lick of a sticky tongue.

She knew that feeling.

"Bandersnatch!" She said with relief from in between the beast's relentless licks. "Thank heaven its you! You gave me quite the scare."

"Alice!" Time screamed. He arrived together with Mally, the Second leading the way. "Let go of the child, you foul monster!"

"Wait, Time, Mally!" Said Alice, pushing the Bandersnatch away as quickly as she could. She took deep breaths of refreshing air before she continued talking. "It's okay. It's the Bandersnatch!"

"Oh, how many times…" Mally said, disappointed at the loss of a potential good fight. She went next to the Bandersnatch and pinched him in the paw. The Bandersnatch squealed and backed down. "I've told you before, don't surprise people like that. You can hurt them! Not everybody has the same strength as you."

"That's not necessary Mally." Alice tried to intervene, but Time came to her side.

"Are you okay?"

"Just a few scratches, and some broken ribs." Alice immediately regretted her words when was little visible of Time's face became paler than usual. "I'm kidding. Not sure I would be if it wasn't for your cloak."

It wasn't just an attempt at flattery to appease Time. If it hadn't been for it, Alice feared she would meet Tarrant with a few broken bones and crushed muscles.

"Of course it did. I made it, after all."

Once he was sure Alice was alright, Time left her and went to Mally and the Bandersnatch. The mouse had finished scolding the beast, and was now on top of his head, scratching him behind his ear.

"Tell this thing to go away, mouse. I don't want any more incidents like this one again." Time ordered.

"He can help us." Said Mally tenderly. "You will, won't you boy? You'll help us find Bim."

The Bandersnatch silly grin froze at the sound of that name. His pupils dilatated to the point they were as black as Alice's cloak.

He dashed towards Alice like a dog does after its owner returns home. Time put himself between them.

The Bandersnatch moved so wildly Mally could barely hold on to his fur.

The Bandersnatch halted before Time and knelt in front of him.

"Looks like the beast has acknowledged me as the dominant." He said with arrogance.

"No." Alice said. She knelt next to the Bandersnatch and looked him in the eye. He whimpered and became restless, moving his head up and down time and time again. "I think he wants us to ride him."
The Bandersnatch growled happily. On top of its head, Mally was too dizzy to talk.

"Nonsense. Besides, weren't we looking for that stupid boy Bim?"

The Bandersnatch again became agitated. Alice put both her hands on his head to calm him down.

"Bim?" She said to him. "Do you know where he is? Will you take us to him?"

The Bandersnatch panted and nodded.

Trusting her gut and the Bandersnatch alike, Alice got on his back and put the disoriented Mally inside the chest pocket of her cloak.

"Time, let's go."

"No way! I'm not getting on that thing. He is a beast, a Bandersnatch! He is no more intelligent than the fruit people in the Outlands!" Time stepped away and turned his back. "Besides, I hate riding him. I always end up with a sick stomach and a destroyed back."

The Second looked at Time, gave out a tiny "tick" and jumped aboard just in front of Alice.

"Time, I can't guarantee you anything." Said Alice. "Maybe you are right, maybe I am putting too much faith in this, but … you'll just have to trust me on this one."

Time didn't answer or turned around.

"Please."

Time looked at the sky and screamed.

He turned on his heels and, without looking at Alice, he got on the Bandersnatch.

"You mortals are really too much trouble!" He said "I swear that if this all turns out to be for nothing, I'll..."

The Bandersnatch, uncaring and not fully aware of his rant, began to trot at full speed.

The cold wind of the night crashed against Alice's face like needles and made it hard for her to open her eyes. Her ears, nose and mouth soon became numb.

Mally hung on to the silk of the cloak as if it were the reins of a carriage. The Second shrieked in amusement, overwhelmed by what was probably the most exciting moment in its life.

Time held his hat in its place and cursed under his breath over and over again.

"Why did I ever leave my castle?!" He shouted as the Bandersnatch ran even faster. "Stupid me, stupid me! Wait, what's that?"

Her teary eyes only allowed Alice to see the silhouette of the train. Soon, the sound of the wheels and the smell of iron and smoke reached her.

"No, this cannot be!" Said Time, alarmed and offended in equal doses. "Who dares to steal my train? And how is he or she conducting it? No one knows how to do it but me! Me and..."

"Bim." Finished Alice.
Mally gasped, and Alice could only imagine was expression laid underneath Time's mask.

"No, he …" Started Mally. "…no, I'm wrong. He would, he definitely would."

"That ungrateful rascal!" Spat Time. Then, with genuine concern, he added. "What is he thinking? He can't drive that train at that speed! It will derail!"

"We have to stop him!" Said Alice, her heart thumping hardly inside her chest. "We have to hurry before it's too late!"

"Hurry, Bandersnatch" Urged Mally with distraught voice. "Do not lose that train. Whatever you do, don't lose it!"

The Bandersnatch growled with determination and pushed his speed beyond its limits.

We must stop him. Thought Alice as the train became closer to her with every second it passed. We will stop him, Tarrant. I promise.

______________________________

Chess watched as Alice and the rest disappeared from his sight together with the runaway train.

"Good luck, Alice." He whispered.

He grinned, and thought of his friends and Tarrant one more time before he vanished underneath a starry sky.

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