Heart and Sole

by Manniness

Summary

When Alice discovers who the right man is for her, she finds him slipping even further out of her reach. And when Hamish watches Alice disappear from his family's home, he begins stumbling upon Underland in the most unlikely of places. (Oh, and there may be a shoe or two thrown in somewhere.)

Notes

Inspired by just_a_dram and her request (many, many months ago) for a fic in which Alice has to wait on the Hatter for once.

Thank you to wanderamaranth for helping me sort out this plot bunny. More thanks to my husband for listening to my authorish emoting and making suggestions that are made of Awesome.

Disclaimer: Alice in Wonderland and its characters, storyline, setting, and other concepts are the property of Walt Disney Studios, Tim Burton, and Lewis Carroll. Where I have created original words for the purpose of writing fan fiction, I have stated so in the Glossary of Underland posted here on this Live Journal. No copyright infringement is intended and no compensation was given to the author for creating this work. (I just loved the movie too much to let the end be The End.)
Chapter 1

She had not known what to do, here, on this battlefield. Honestly, she is still not sure how she had managed to defeat the Jabberwocky. With pure muchness, the Hatter might say. But now is not the time for reassurances meant for her. She regards the Hatter – the tasteless, thick blood of the Jabberwocky coating her tongue – and knows that this moment is not for her. It is for him. And, for the first time in her life, Alice knows the right thing to say.

“How is a raven like a writing desk?”

The smile he gives her is full of sorrow and pride and hope and something else that does more than tighten his stretchy smile and puff up his chest. Something that makes his eyes glow and the tension bleed from his brows.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” he confides.

She is entranced by that look, by the meaning that is bursting to make itself known to her.

The Hatter takes half a step forward – Why only half a step? she wonders. He is not a man who bothers with half measures! – and whispers softly in her ear.

“Fairfarren, Alice.”

His breath is warm and stirs the strands of her disheveled hair against her sweaty neck. When he half-steps back, that look is still there, straining against his simple, happy smile. Straining…

She leans toward him, entranced by that look, aching to understand… and then suddenly she is floating-flying-soaring (Yes, now she knows what it must feel like to fly!) up the rabbit hole. The light from the mildly overcast day blinds her as she scrabbles and scrambles out of the hole. For a moment, she sits on its edge, contemplating the abyss below her soles. Her dress is smudged and probably ruined. Her hair is loose and she suspects the sharp pain in her head, near her temple (where she’d knocked it against the stones on the battlefield) will develop into a very annoying goose egg before the day is out.

But she cannot dawdle here, dwelling on that; she has much to do. The party, Hamish, her mother… they all have to be dealt with. But not yet. Alice takes one more moment to remember the Hatter’s parting expression, to savor his proud smile. She recalls his nearness in that instant in which he’d bidden her farewell. “Fairfarren, Alice…” She regrets that she hadn’t thought to inhale just then. Or even lean her forehead against his shoulder. Or…

“How!” she scolds herself. She could not stay. There are questions she must answer and things she must do!

And she does them.

“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.”
“I love you, Margaret, but this is my life. I’ll decide what to do with it.”

“You’re lucky to have my sister for you wife, Lowell. You’d better be good to her. I’ll be watching very closely.”

“There is no prince, Aunt Imogene. You need to talk to someone about these delusions.”

“I happen to love rabbits, especially white ones.”

“Don’t worry mother. I’ll find something useful to do with my life.”

“You two remind me of some funny boys I met once in a dream.”

Part of her is proud of herself for asserting her independence – she makes the path, after all! – yet, as she listens to herself, part of her is appalled by her own very poor manners. These guests had taken the trouble to come all this way to attend her engagement party. True, she had not consented to – or even been properly informed of – the engagement itself until it was too late to do anything about it, but these people do not deserve such ungrateful words.

And yet, for this very bad behavior, she is rewarded.

“You’ve left me out,” Lord Ascot gently interjects.

“No I haven’t, sir. You and I have business to discuss.”

And they do, despite her childishly daring dance. Lord Ascot listens to her proposal, asks her to apprentice with the company and Alice can feel herself smiling but…

She is confused. Horribly confused. What is going on here? Why does she feel as if she is a passenger in another girl’s body? Why is her life moving onward without her expressed permission? Why does she keep moving forward, as if she is a mere puppet or an unwilling actor in a play? What can’t she stop herself?

Suddenly, Alice is overwhelmed with new work and responsibilities. The tedium of her burgeoning career, her mother’s disappointment and London itself swirl, become a frightening whirlwind, around her. Surrounding her! For a time, she can only close her eyes and imagine pressing her palms to her ears. She does not want these duties, these boardroom meetings, these colleagues who look down their noses at her, a mere girl in their midst! But, despite her efforts, she cannot shut her eyes and ears to them completely. The Alice that everyone sees does not seem to mind or notice their scorn. But the Alice within – her true self – feels the sting acutely.

And then – at last! – a peaceful patch of clear weather calls to her. When she dares to look around her, she finds herself on the bow of a ship, dressed for travel. The color of her suit mocks her, reminds her of the garments she had worn in Underland, the garments that had been thoughtfully altered for her, but this is not Underland! Where is she going? To China? On an adventure – a meaningless, silly quest that hardly compares to the death-defying trials she has already endured – to buy spices for people who will only ever want more-more-more?!

She stands on the bow of the ship, alone.

Alone!

Is this her life now? Having rejected Hamish, she must now take this lonely path? She stares out at the flat, featureless water and the endless horizon. Two halves that are destined to be apart, no matter what her eyes show her.

This is WRONG!
Alice despairs as she considers the wide world before her. Where are her friends? Why is her life leading her away from them? Away from Underland and him?

NO!

And then a bright blue butterfly flutters past her cheek. Her heart leaps with painful intensity within her chest. “Hello, Absolem,” she whispers, relieved. Absolem is here and even if she is a stupid girl, he will take her home.

She watches as he ascends into the uncharacteristically fair English sky. She aches to join him, to go with him, to fly. The suit she wears is too bulky, layered, stuffy and heavy. The shoes are too stiff and tight. The air is too empty of laughter and the world around her lacks any trace of friendship or goodness or even warmth.

Friendship, goodness, and warmth… She had felt them in Underland, even in the most unlikely of places: at a moldering tea table in the shadow of a ramshackle windmill, in the Bandersnatch’s frumious hut, in the hat workshop at Crims with the Hatter’s iron shackle clinking with his every movement…

She stubbornly stares up at her fluttering friend. Tears stream from her eyes. They burn her skin as they spill onto her cheeks but she doesn’t blink, doesn’t look away.

Take me with you! Take me HOME!

The sky seems to scream with light, to pulse with infinity and still she does not look away.

She screams back in silence. Regret bursts forth from her very being in the form of a single word:

Hatter!

“Alice?”

She flinches, cringes against the odd, unyielding casing that rubs against her body. Her mouth feels sticky and too warm: with her silent screams, some of the Jabberwocky blood she had swallowed has pooled in her mouth again, clinging to her tongue and teeth and lips.

“Alice?” a man’s voice whisper-lisps at her. She feels his hands on her face, cradling her head.

Emotion rushes, hot and thick, into her throat. Hatter? she wants to ask, but can’t. Asking implies an acceptance of whatever answer is given and she will not tolerate a denial. He must be the Hatter. He must be! She doesn’t know what she’ll do if the sound of his voice is merely a trick that her ears are playing on her.

“Alice?” he tries again. His tone is tireless and taut with tension. “Have you decided to stay?”

And because the answer is a resounding yes, she opens her eyes and sighs with acute relief.

The Hatter is kneeling over her on the battlefield, beneath the overcast sky. The clouds themselves grumble as the sun endeavors to shove his way through and illuminate the realm of the White Queen with the light of victory. At the periphery of her sight, the queen herself and Alice’s friends still stand. Alice knows she ought to be embarrassed by her predicament. Here she is, having quite obviously collapsed onto the stones, and now the Hatter cradling her across his lap in a posture so intimate she ought to be alarmed. She isn’t.

“Alice?” he prompts again, waiting. As he waits, his fingers brush against her cheeks, wiping away her tears, and she sees the iridescent gleam of a viscous, purple liquid upon his stained and
scratched fingertips. The blood of the Jabberwocky, she realizes, and the tears that had felt burning-hot against her face are one in the same.

Still, she cannot speak around the knot of Everything in her throat. How is it she is here again, having just lived months – no, years! – Above?

“Have you chosen Underland, Alice?” he lisps, his brows twitching as he supports her armored shoulders amongst the weed-crowded stones.

She studies his face. Behind the pleasant expression, she senses a desperation that makes him stare at her, unblinking.

Is that what she had just experienced? A choice? The blood had shown her what her life could be, were she to return?

“You…” he rasps. His tone sharply contrasts with his benign countenance. He clears his throat. “You could still go back,” he warbles, his voice cracking on the final syllable. “But you must take care not shed another tear while your eyes are open here.”

The fact that he does not even notice the rhyme shocks her, awakens her to the gravity of the situation. She has cried out most of the Jabberwocky blood. If she loses any more, the path that leads back to her family and London will be closed to her. Alice thinks about that path and considers its destination: China. She then imagines a different way she might choose Above, an alternative choice… until it leads her to marriage to a lord. Unacceptable!

The Hatter gently brushes her damp, Jabberwocky-blood-soaked hair back from her temples and she leans into the thoughtful touch. She does not know where this path – the one that leads her from this battlefield – will take her. She suspects that, just as she had lived the one in London in a whirlwind of moments, she is living this one with the speed of a slow spillage of treacle.

She takes a deep breath. She fights against the hinges of the gauntlets and uncurls her fingers, reaches for the Hatter and holds onto him as he holds onto her.

His wide-eyed gaze travels over her erratically as she moves and shifts closer to him. He looks as if he expects to wake up any moment, as if he suddenly fears it is he who is the dreamer and she the dream. “Alice…? Your family…” he reminds her, breathlessly. “Your home…!”

“Is here,” she answers, at last raising her arms. He leans forward just as he had when she’d replaced his hat, accommodating her as she loops her shaking arms around his shoulders. She curls her steel-encased fingers into his jacket and hangs onto him. “I am home.”

She does not know what she will do here, who she will be, but she will not be that lonely, ungrateful, ambition-drunk girl on a boat. She will not. She will be better. She simply hopes that the Hatter, and all her friends here in Underland, will show her how.

But first she still has things to do and questions to answer.

“Is it real?” she asks him, her throat tight and eyes stinging. “If I go back now, and speak to them – say my farewells – is it real?”

He considers both her expression and her words. “If you’re dreaming, then nothing is real.”

“No,” she suddenly decides. “If I’m dreaming, then everything is real.”

“Including me?” he dares.
She smiles. “Especially you.”

The Hatter grins happily and Alice sighs, content in that moment. But it doesn’t last. It can’t last! Not when there are people waiting for her Above. Yes, there are things she must do, but…

Alice removes her arms from the Hatter’s shoulders and then shakes off her gauntlets, tossing them aside carelessly. She reaches for the Hatter’s purple-smeared fingers and wraps them around her left wrist. “Hold on to me,” she orders him thickly. She can feel the last of the tears burning against her eyes. If she sheds them now, she will lose this chance forever. But if she sheds them above, she will lose him… “Hold on tightly and don’t let me go.”

His expression moves from a flicker of puzzlement to earnest dedication in an instant. “I will help you remember,” he swears.

With a nod and a tight smile, Alice closes her eyes and swallows deliberately so that every last drop of blood slides down her throat. She thinks of her home, the party, the rabbit hole, and…!

“Ow!” Alice cringes away from the root she’d butted with her head. Dirt from the rim of the rabbit hole rains down on her and she spits and shakes her head to get it out of her mouth and eyes. She sighs and glances up at the bright circle of light just beyond her reach. She digs the toes of her boots into the hole’s earthen walls and, with a bit of scrambling and a great heave, she manages to emerge.

Alice levers herself onto the grassy knoll and gazes down into the hole’s depths. Her eyes sting, as if she’d just been crying. She lifts the somewhat clean backs of her hands, pressing one after the other to her cheeks, but feels no trace of wetness. How odd. With a sigh, she returns her attention to the abyss beneath her. Had she truly fallen down there? She must have. Her head aches a bit and, when she lifts a grimy hand to her hair, she feels a hard bump on her scalp. What had happened? It’s difficult for her to remember. Before she had fallen, she’d been running, chasing something… She’d seen it just after Hamish had asked her to—

“Hamish!” she gasps, horrified. “Oh, well done, Alice. Running off like that. Truly a moment of grandeur, that.” Groaning, she pushes herself to her feet. What is she going to tell him? She doesn’t know. But she certainly can’t hide out here or even down that old rabbit hole forever! “I have to tell him I can’t. I can’t marry him,” she mutters to herself.

But then the oddest thing happens. A strange pressure – from some invisible source – squeezes her left hand. She looks down at it as she curls her fingers in and then stretches them out and wiggles them. She waits. Nothing happens. Perhaps it had simply been her imagination that, just now, it had felt like someone had grasped her hand tightly. Yes, just her imagination. Nothing more.

“Right. Hamish,” she scolds herself and, with a deep breath, sets off in the direction of the unwelcome engagement party.

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“She left me standing here without an answer,” Hamish mutters. He can hear the resentment in
his tone and silently rebukes himself for it. It will do no good to express his mortification here, in public. Things are bad enough already.

He shoots a glance at Alice’s sister who is studiously avoiding his gaze. He resists the urge to turn toward Mrs. Kingsleigh. He does not want to give the guests any reason to suspect that he blames Charles Kingsleigh’s daughter or widow – the family of one of his father’s oldest friends – for Alice’s behavior. Still! Alice must have known about today’s event! She must have guessed! And certainly someone here would have told her once she’d arrived. The whole lot of them are absolutely dreadful at keeping things – especially other people’s business – to themselves. Alice had been given plenty of time to compose herself so that she might accept gracefully instead of bounding off into the wood!

He cannot bring himself to address the guests. The shame is too great. His mother steps forward and murmurs discreetly, “Perhaps she… Oh!”

A collective gasp of horror echoes in the garden. Hamish turns and looks up and sees…

“Alice?”

He studies her sullied dress and ruined shoes and tangled hair. *Dear God, it looks as if she…*

“Are you all right?” Lord Ascot inquires.

“What happened to you?” Helen asks.

Hamish opens his mouth to ask if she has sustained any injuries but Alice turns toward him, interrupting his thought.

“Hamish, I’m sorry.” The entire garden is utterly silent, breathless with anticipation. “I shouldn’t have run off like that. I panicked. It was silly,” she apologizes to him with a sheepish expression and then, with a look, extends the comment to Lord Ascot. Then glancing at her mother, she replies, “I fell down and hit my head.”

Slightly mollified, Hamish holds out a hand to her. She takes it. His entire being breathes a sigh of relief. Yes, everything will be all right. The moment of shame, though it had seemed to last for an eternity, is over.

“Could you see me inside?” she asks him softly. “I think I need to sit down and rest for a moment.”

Hamish is a little startled that she has made this request to him rather than her mother, but he says nothing on that subject. As this is the first sensible thing Alice has said all day, he happily acquiesces. “Of course.” He bows briefly in her mother’s direction. They will need a chaperone, after all. “Madam Kingsleigh, if you would accompany us?” Hamish intones humbly.

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

With Hamish on her left and Helen on her right, they escort Alice toward the house. Already, Hamish can hear the whispers and speculation, but he endures them with his head held high. In truth, it could have been much worse. The moment the three of them enter the parlor, Alice steps away from them and, rather than taking a seat, stands tall and straight in the center of the room.

“I’m sorry I ruined your proposal, Hamish.” She glances at Helen who is still standing beside him, looking prepared to catch Alice at a moment’s notice should the girl suddenly swoon. “But I have something to say, and I couldn’t say it… out there.”
“What is it?” Helen demands, still examining her daughter for other signs of distress.

“Mother, when you sold father’s company to Lord Ascot, my future was discussed, wasn’t it?” She glances away from Helen and toward him. Hamish feels his shirt collar become suddenly and most irregularly warm. “And it was decided?”

“Alice…” Helen begins but says no more.

Alice takes a step in Hamish’s direction and faces him squarely. Her boldness startles him. Who is this creature who had dashed off into the forest not fifteen minutes ago? “Hamish, you know I’m not… the sort of person who would be a proper lady. But you asked me anyway. Thank you for caring about my future. But I’ll be fine. And you need someone… right. For you. We both know that’s not me.”

He opens his mouth to argue – he and Alice have had quite a bit of practice with arguing and the habit is unfortunately ingrained at this point – and then closes it. “I do care for you, Alice,” he admits but the words come easily. That, in and of itself, tells him that they are friends and will never be more than that – even if they were to wed – but he can sense now that that is very unlikely to happen.

“And I care for you,” she replies. “That’s why I must say no.”

He lets out a long breath. His disappointment stems not from the loss of a future with Alice Kingsleigh, but from the wretchedness of this whole episode. Alice frowns slightly and glances down at her left hand. She shakes it a bit and Hamish again wonders if she had hurt herself out there…

“Unfortunately, Hamish has already asked. Publically,” Helen reminds them gently and unnecessarily. “Would you shame his family – and ours – by refusing?”

Alice’s hand must not be hurting too badly because she swiftly gives them both her full attention. “That was why I needed to have a moment in private with you, Hamish,” Alice says. “We need to think of a reason to cancel the engagement. Something that doesn’t embarrass anyone too badly.”

Hamish blinks, startled. The Alice he knows never would have spared a thought for the feelings of others, for gossip and the judgmental nature of Society. Nor would she have cared about family honor. “What do you suggest?” he offers, wondering how far Alice’s forethought has traveled.

“I... I might refuse on the grounds that I’d rather not be looked after by your father. You haven’t begun working yet, Hamish, and… really, it was unfair of them to encourage you to propose when you’re not… settled yet.”

Hamish raises his brows. It is an excellent point, even if his pride is stung both on his own behalf and on behalf of his father.

“That, compounded with my own difficulties…”

“Difficulties?” Helen demands.

Alice smiles sadly. “I still miss papa. I’m... I’m not ready to…” She motions with her hand toward the nearest curtained window and the garden party beyond it and then, once again, she frowns at her own arm. This time, she wraps her right hand around the opposite wrist and rubs it. Again, Hamish thinks to send for the doctor. Again, he is interrupted.
“Our main concern,” Helen says softly, reaching out to pet her daughter’s shoulder, “was for your welfare, darling.”

“I appreciate that, Mother, but this isn’t…” She sighs. “I don’t want this. And it’s unfair to Hamish.”

Helen’s lips tighten with an unpleasant thought. “Lady Ascot will want you to reconsider, Alice.”

Alice, oddly enough, looks ready to argue with the woman. “I know. It’s fine. I’ll handle this, Mother. I’d rather you not be involved directly.”

“Well,” Helen exclaims softly. She glances at Hamish, brows lifted in surprise. Clearly, he is not the only one to sense a change in Alice. “In that case, I suppose we’d best invite Lord and Lady Ascot to this gathering.”

Alice nods.

As Mrs. Kingsleigh departs, Hamish regards this more somber, thoughtful, and contentious Alice, and he finds himself intrigued by and yet frustrated with her. She appears to have become the sort of young woman he would choose to marry of his own free will, with no parental urging to guide him, and yet she has already refused him. The irony is bitter.

She lifts a dirty hand to her head and winces. Hamish, silently chastising himself for his lack of hospitality, inquires, “How is your head, Alice? And your hand?” he adds, recalling her apparent irritation with it. “If you’d like, I could ask Doctor Benton to come in. He’s just outside in the garden…”

Alice shakes her head slowly. “No, thank you. It’s just a bump. And my wrist is… I’m fine. Although…” She wanders slowly away and carefully studies the fireplace even though she’s seen it countless times before. Frowning into the looking glass above the mantle, she confesses, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I have ideas for your father’s trading company but I don’t want…” She bites her lip, lifts a hand to her eyes as if trying to press back oncoming tears. “That’s not for me, either,” Alice finally announces her voice thick with a repressed sniffle.

Before Hamish can think of some way to console her, she meets his gaze – no tears, thank God! – and says with a sad smile, “I don’t suppose you would be interested in going to China and setting up a trade office there? It would be very lucrative for the company.”

The business proposal distracts him from his mild concern for her emotional state, which seems to be a bit more precarious than usual. Her suggestion is daring – like Alice herself – and full of potential. He can’t help but agree with her assessment. “I will suggest it,” he promises.

“It was my father’s dream, trading with China. Bringing the whole world to London.”

Her wistful tone twists his heart. “It will be done, Alice,” he swears and earns a bright smile for his efforts. “But what of you?” In refusing him, and with her mother’s income severely limited due to the sale of the company, Alice will have a difficult time of things unless she has made very careful plans for her future. Even though they won’t be marrying, Hamish is still very concerned for her. They’ve known each other nearly their whole lives, after all.

She swallows thickly. “I—“

At that moment, the parlor door opens. Hamish’s mother and father, along with Alice’s family, enter the room.
“Are you all right, son?” his father asks softly as the lady of the manor bustles past and rounds on Alice.

“What’s this all about?” Lady Ascot demands. “Alice, why the delay in accepting Hamish’s proposal? I thought you would be a bit more—"”

“She isn’t accepting it, Mother,” Hamish interjects on Alice’s behalf. He can guess what his mother would say next and it does not need to be said. “She has excellent reasons. With which I concur.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Hamish moves to stand beside Alice. They are in this together against the dragon his mother can be when her plans are disrupted. Usually, Hamish follows his father’s example and simply steps aside to give her more room to bellow and fume. Not this time. He steps up, takes up the gauntlet as it were, and discovers that he rather enjoys the experience. Smiling, he explains gently, “Alice has very selflessly encouraged me to become my own man before being a husband and a father and I am accepting her offer.”

“Ah,” Lady Ascot responds, her frown lifting. She gives Alice an evaluative look. “So you’re postponing the wedding? Well, I suppose that can be arranged—”

“No, I’m afraid you misunderstand, madam,” Alice replies in such a clear, strong voice that Hamish can only look on in awe. “Hamish and I will not be marrying.”

“You’ll get no better offers, young lady,” his mother scolds. “If you can get any offers at all after this debacle. Why the shame of it—!”

“The shame,” Alice responds most rudely, “is yours for speaking of your son as if he is a commodity.” Alice glances past Lady Ascot’s shoulder at her sister. “He’s a fine man, but I think we can all agree that I am not the right one for him.”

Again, Alice shakes her left hand, fistng it this time. It doesn’t seem to distract her from her purpose, however. She turns back to Lady Ascot and says factually, “After this, I don’t expect to have any offers – at least not from anyone in London Society – and that’s fine.”

“Oh, Alice,” Helen sighs wearily.

Margaret looks gravely concerned.

Hamish’s own mother is blatantly horrified.

Hamish wonders if he can convincingly mask a chuckle behind the act of blowing his nose. Probably not. Pity. True, he should probably be equally scandalized by Alice’s announcement, but he can’t bring himself to manage it. The young woman before him has burst forth from her dull, brown chrysalis with magnificent beauty. Even the dirt and mud, sticks and scrapes cannot distract from that. This is Alice. This is the woman she is meant to be. For the first time, Hamish wonders if he might not be on the same par as her. The thought, rather than being demoralizing, motivates. He and Alice have always enjoyed something of an adversarial relationship. He will not allow her to out stripe him now!

“Alice’s acceptance of the proposal was an unreasonable expectation in the first place,” he adds, seeing the gathering storm in his mother’s thunderous expression. “She has only recently lost her father, with whom she was very close. Asking her to join our family is not a decision she can make now. It was wrong to force it upon her so soon.”
There’s really nothing his mother can say to that. Abject grief is – as it has always been – an untouchable subject with regards to criticism. Alice should be admired for her loyalty toward her late father. And while she clearly still misses him, Hamish doubts she is truly incapable of making decisions about her life. Well, this wouldn’t be the first time grief for a loved one has been used as an excuse to delay or avoid an unpalatable decision and it won’t be the last. It’s a perfectly sensible reason to refuse a marriage proposal, and he admires her for utilizing it so skillfully.

“Oh, sister,” Margaret says, stepping away from her husband and approaching Alice. “You silly fool. What will become of you? If you go back out there and tell everyone…”

Where Alice had stood dry-eyed and stolid against the bluster of Lady Ascot, she folds in the face of her sister’s love. Her eyes shimmer with tears. “I must do this,” she chokes out.

Margaret pulls Alice into a warm embrace despite her younger sister’s ruined clothes and dirty hands. “Dear Alice. What is the matter with you?”

Rather than lean her head on Margaret’s shoulder and weep, as Hamish expects she will (and has braced himself for), Alice stiffens. “What… what did you say?”

“Alice?”

But Alice doesn’t appear to be listening. Her eyes, still shimmering with unshed tears, unfocus. In a dazed tone, she murmurs, “Did you say… hatter?”

Margaret frowns. “No, I didn’t. I said ‘matter’, Alice. What is going on?”

Alice, however, merely mumbles, “What is the hatter with me? Hat… hats… hatter…”

Just when Hamish wonders if, somehow, just when Alice had been at her most lucid and sane, she had suddenly – at the mere turn of a phrase – been pushed past the brink of sanity, her eyes focus again. Her expression morphs into one of horror as she now clutches her left wrist in her hand, lifting it to her chest in a gesture that is nearly desperate. “I’d forgotten. He told me I would and I did. I have to go back,” Hamish thinks she mumbles, but he can’t be sure.

Before he can ponder the utterance, Alice says decisively, “Margaret, I love you, but this is my life. I won’t allow the benefits of privilege to dictate my choices and you shouldn’t either.” She looks past Margaret’s shoulder to Lowell. “I think you two have a lot to discuss about the expectations you have for your marriage.”

Without waiting for a response to that very personal remark, Alice turns to her mother. “I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you, but I’m not meant for this place or this life. We both know that.”

“Alice, what—?”

Hamish watches as Alice embraces her mother tightly and presses a kiss to her cheek. Speaking over the startled woman’s shoulder, Alice says to him, “You are a fine gentleman, Hamish. “

His throat tightens as she chokes on the last syllable of his name. Her eyes are swimming with tears now as she releases her mother and steps back. Hamish frowns at the sight of those tears – strange tears. They seem to be an odd, luminescent lavender but that can’t be right… Purple tears cannot be leaking from her eyes and clumping viscously in her lashes. That is impossible.

“I have to go now,” she announces and then, before any of them can snap out of their shock, she sprints for the parlor door.

“Alice!” Helen shrieks on a gasp. The sound of her voice startles Hamish into motion and they
both race to the door. It has not yet struck the opposite wall; they are only a moment behind Alice. Surely, they will catch her.

On the threshold of the hallway, Hamish hears Alice say in a strangled whisper, “Hatter! Bring me back. Bring me back.”

Her words make no sense at all. He is accustomed to Alice not making any sense, but in this case he is alarmed. He has never heard her sound so in need of anything. He has never heard her beg. She is begging now, just out of sight, a few steps down the hall.

Hamish crosses the threshold and turns toward her an instant before Helen. He can see Alice crouching behind a massive potted fern. He opens his mouth to call out to her.

“Hatter, bring me—“

And then Helen is standing in front of him, blocking his view. She hurries blindly toward her daughter. Hamish thinks he sees a flicker of movement over Mrs. Kingsleigh’s shoulder and then the woman pulls up short, her gaze locked on the space on the other side of the fern. Her hand lifts to her face to smother a gasp. The sound pulls Hamish forward and he hastens to her side. He reaches her not a moment too soon. He catches Helen when she swoons and only then does he glance up.

He stares at the place where, only a moment before, Alice had been whispering furiously. The space beside the massive plant is vacant. He looks up and down the hall, but the gesture is futile. There are no nearby rooms or nooks in which she could be hiding. Alice had, quite simply, disappeared without a trace.

Several moments pass. Hamish at last gathers his wits when his mother stomps into the hall demanding, “Well? Where has she run off to this time?”

“I do not know,” he admits as Margaret hurries to her mother’s aid. “She is… gone.”

“Gone?” Lady Ascot scoffs. But when Hamish says nothing in reply, she glances at Helen and her expression melts into one of apprehension. “That cannot be, Hamish. She couldn’t have vanished into thin air. That’s impossible.”

Perhaps it is, but it had happened nonetheless. He glances back at the place where Alice had just been. Had she done the impossible? Hamish chides himself; he shouldn’t be surprised, really. If there is anyone in this world who could recognize and harness magic, it would be Alice Kingsleigh. Of that he has no doubt whatsoever.
Chapter 2

“Hatter!”

“Here, Alice. Right here.”

She rubs at her eyes furiously with both hands. They feel raw and gummy and her vision swims. She misses the Hatter’s warm grip on her wrist, but at the moment clearing her vision and ensuring that she is where she wants to be is a higher priority.

“Did I go? Did I really speak to them?” she rasps, blinking up at him.

He smiles gently. “I believe it was a most productive dream.”

She grins back and relaxes. She can only imagine the mess she must look but he doesn’t seem to notice. He simply looks at her and she looks back at him, noting the mismatched green of his eyes, the pallor of his skin, the gap between his front teeth. Here, this is the right man for her and she can stay.

Alice reaches for him slowly, shyly this time, but he does not deny her. His hand is warm on her back, helping her sit up and lean against him. Her eyes flood once more and the world turns blurrily violet. “This is the last of the tears,” she predicts. “I’m staying in Underland.” With you.

He trembles in her embrace and she turns toward the warmth of his neck and the softness of his hair. She inhales deeply, marvels at the spicy-yet-slightly-sweaty scent of him, and sheds those final tears. Their purpleness may very well stain his handsome jacket. If he minds, she will find a way to make it up to him… but she doesn’t think he will.

She has made her choice.

“Thank you, Alice,” he lisps softly into her ear. His breath tickles her neck and she shivers but not with cold. With delight, perhaps? The sensation is so new she can’t be sure.

In truth, she should be the one thanking him, but she can’t seem to find her voice. She presses her face into his lapel. If she would be lean back, he might kiss her. Or she might kiss him. And then what? Would he court her? For the first time in her life, the thought thrills rather than disgusts her. But it also terrifies. Not quite yet, she decides and sighs happily when he briefly presses his cheek to the crown of her head.

Behind her, a sudden and startling cheer goes up. She twitches and turns, then smiles widely at the Tweedles who are applauding and Thackery who is banging his ladle on the stones. Nivens looks very pleased and Chessur is – of course – grinning. Bayard barks happily, his great doggy tail wagging furiously. The White Queen clasps her hands together beneath her chin, smiling widely. Their joy brings even more tears to Alice’s tired eyes.

“So yer stayin’?” Mally challenges her.

“Yes,” Alice chokes out, reveling in the feel of the Hatter’s arm across her back. Even through
the armor she can sense its warmth and strength. She wipes at her tears and notes that they are clear. The Jabberwocky blood is spent. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

“Humph!” Mally asserts, crossing her arms. “Yah go changin’ yer mind an’ sommun else is gonna be stuck.”

Alice bites her lip to hold back the smile at Mally’s threat. “Noted.”

Mally nods and, pivoting smartly, marches over to the crowd of Red Knights looking on in confusion. “Right, you lot! Those’oo wanna apply tah th’ White Queen fer reassignment, form a line thar. An’ those’oo wanna be done wi’ yer armor fer good, over thar!”

“Has Mally been promoted?” Alice murmurs to the Hatter as he helps her to her feet.

“A self-promotion,” he agrees with delight. “Marvelously efficient, those.”

Yes, she can see that to be true. Already, the soldiers are hopping to obey the dormouse’s instructions.

“Alice,” the White Queen murmurs as she glides forward. “I can’t tell you how your decision to stay pleases me.”

“The pleasure is mine,” she replies, grinning. The Hatter still stands at her side (still irreverently utilizing his claymore as a walking stick) and – despite her wobbly knees and throbbing head – she feels as if she could take on a dozen Jabberwockies!

The White Queen holds out a hand to her, which Alice takes. She allows herself to be escorted back to the Bandersnatch. “Will you be staying on as my champion, dear?” Mirana of Marmoreal queries.

“Oh, I…” She honestly hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Ah, yes. Ponder that,” the queen advises. “But first things must come first.” The White Queen leans forward, her fingers dancing in the air, and presses a kiss against Alice’s hair on the very spot where her head throbs relentlessly. “There. Now, up you go. Take care not to pinch him with your armor.”

Feeling a bemused grin curving her lips, Alice does as she’s told, wondering if a kiss really might have a kind of healing magic here in this world. It could simply be her imagination, but her head already feels better.

She settles between the Bandersnatch’s shoulders and the queen nods. “Excellent. Now, tell me…”

Alice looks at her over the furry head of the Bandersnatch. The queen’s tone demands her full attention.

“Just how green is the grass on the other side?”

Alice grins. “In all fairness,” she answers honestly, “it is just as green as it is here. But…” her gaze flicks in the Hatter’s direction. He doesn’t notice; he’s busy giggling at some observation Tweedledum (or perhaps it’s Tweedledee) had made. “It just wasn’t for me.”

Smiling, Mirana pats Alice’s armored thigh. “That’s good to hear, Alice,” she replies on a confidential whisper and with a queenly wink.
As the queen drifts toward her mount and the thoughtfully-provided steps leading up to his back, Alice straightens up on the Bandersnatch, breathing deeply and glorying in the wind that pushes gently at her back. She surveys the battlefield, the card soldiers and chess guard. She smiles at her motley assortment of friends. She stares helplessly at the Hatter who, in that moment, looks up and meets her gaze with a friendly grin. Blushing, Alice smiles back.

Yes, this is her world now. She has made her choice. For better or worse.

*~*~*~*

Things could have been worse, although not by much. Hamish frowns into the looking glass over the washbasin in his room and frowns. Today, he is not scowling at his own sleep-tousled and rampantly orange hair. No, this scowl is for Alice and where she had inexplicably disappeared to yesterday.

And really, he still doesn’t know what to think about that.

Had she really said “hatter” of all things? Had she really been pulled somewhere else? Some mysterious place that is somehow both very near and yet unperceivable?

His stomach – always sensitive to his mood – twists in a most discouraging manner. Yes, perhaps he ought not think of yesterday, of the reassurances his mother had given the guests – “Alice is resting and her family are looking after her at the moment” – and the quiet explanation his father had provided to several guests – “Alice is still in mourning for her father, the late Charles Kingsleigh. When she is ready, she will reconsider Hamish’s proposal.” Lies, every last syllable. Including his own words. As his father’s explanation had made the rounds, whispered from man to wife and so on, Hamish had answered sympathetic looks and murmurings with brusqueness, “Thank you for your concern, sir and madam. I’ll pass along your kind words to Alice.”

He breathes out harshly, noticing that he’s glaring at the looking glass again. Well, it’s Alice’s fault, really, that he’s in a foul mood. She should have been there, on his arm as they’d made the rounds and spoken to each guest. She wouldn’t have hand to say much, simply be there. After all, such explanations are better distributed indirectly, a task which his mother and father had taken up and performed admirably. Like a well-oiled machine. After a half an hour, Hamish had taken refuge in the house, citing the need to check on Alice’s condition. He’d only returned when the guests had started drifting toward their carriages.

Through it all, his stomach had been in knots. More than once, he’d stopped pacing in the hallway and glared at the space of empty wall beside the potted fern.

Concern had made him wonder: Where are you, Alice?

Irritation had made him accuse: You shouldn’t have left me here to face them alone!

“Blast it,” Hamish mutters, turning away from his own reflection with a blustery sigh and reaching for the water pitcher. Glaring at a bit of lead-backed glass will get him nowhere and he has things to be getting on with today!
He rolls up his sleeves and splashes water on his face. Soaping up his shaving brush is habit by now and he scrubs them onto his face efficiently, barely glancing in the mirror. The razor’s edge is cool against his skin and he finds comfort in that sharp moment of normalness. Yes, the whole incident from the day before might be utterly mad and incomprehensible, but at least this routine hasn’t changed in the slightest.

He shaves carefully and methodically, referring to his reflection in the looking glass more out of habit than any real need to orient himself. His hands know this task well, as does his face which accommodates the razor’s straight edge one expression at a time. He has just finished his upper lip and chin when suddenly, his fingers twitch and the razor tumbles from his grasp into the sudsy basin.

“Bugger all,” he swears softly, noting the darkening spots of used water on his shirtfront. Well, there’s no point in redressing before he finishes up, is there? Significantly more irritated now than he had been moments before, Hamish reaches for the submerged razor, glances up at the soap-dotted mirror, and freezes.

“What the devil…?”

He blinks as the small flecks of shaving cream seem to sway, as if pushed about by a gentle breeze. They move one way, and then another until they spin gently. For a single mad instant, Hamish imagines they are waltzing across the surface of the looking glass!

He blinks, shakes his head, reaches for the towel to wipe the surface clean and—

Is that… Alice?

Hamish squints at the image now reflected in the mirror, his arm upraised and towel grasped in his hand. Surely, that cannot be Alice, dressed in white with skirts frothing around her, dancing with a very wildly-orange-haired man in an equally white suit and a terribly shabby, dark and battered top hat. Surely, Hamish is merely dreaming still!

He stares at the couple twirling together on the dance floor of a ballroom that could only belong in a royal palace. He gapes at Alice’s happy smile and sparkling eyes. He has never seen her look so happy. Nor has he ever seen her so taken with a man, but she clearly is. It makes no sense at all that this odd man with his flyaway orange locks and disreputable hat could hold such fascination for her, but he clearly does.

Hamish would have looked away then, scowling against the bitterness of his own envy, but suddenly Alice and her dance partner halt in their tracks. A motion in the background draws his attention.

Is that a platypus conducting the orchestra?!

Perhaps it is. The creature lowers his baton, signaling the end of the song. And then Alice moves suddenly, her skirts flash brilliantly white, catching his eye and he watches – thunderstruck – as she rises up on her toes, clearly intending to kiss her bizarre companion on his pale cheek. In that moment, however, he seems to giggle and turns toward her, his lips forming themselves around an observation or response which Hamish cannot hear. The man moves as Alice leans in and her lips press not to his cheek, but to the corner of his mouth.

Hamish has never seen Alice blush before as she does now, in the looking glass. The man, however, merely smiles kindly and offers her his arm with admirable aplomb. His lips move again and Hamish finds himself leaning closer, as if a closer proximity will be rewarded with sound. He is mesmerized by the shifting expressions on Alice’s face as she moves from mortification to relief
to something that makes his stomach roll with foreboding and trepidation. Something that looks very much like disappointment, only a hundred times worse! A variety of dread with which Hamish is unfortunately acquainted.

And then—

*Knock, knock.*

Hamish startles, jumping guiltily and dropping the razor back into the basin again.

“Sir?” The voice of the country estate’s butler is muffled by the closed door. “Lord and Lady Ascot are taking breakfast. They request that you join them.”

Clearing his throat, Hamish replies. “Yes, I understand. Thank you.”

Unsettled – for now he realizes that he had not been dreaming just now – Hamish glances at the mirror. A new assortment of froth splatters had joined the previous mess. He studies the looking glass, watches as each clump of soap slowly slides – with no swaying or twirling – downward. There is no ballroom, no platypus conductor or orchestra, no blushing Alice in a white dress, no oddly hatted man smiling indulgently.

“Madness,” he summarizes and then wipes the mirror clean with a few impatient swipes of the towel in his grasp. Once again, Hamish fishes the razor out of the basin and sets the blade against his skin. This time, he manages to finish his shave without further interruptions. Shrugging into a new shirt, he ties his cravat as he moves toward the door. He frowns at the fabric, and does his best not to wonder too deeply at the vision he’d witnessed, for if it had not been a dream…

His stomach twists.

Yes, it’s best not to think such things. Finishing off the knot at his throat, he lifts his chin and marches downstairs to breakfast. There’s the matter of a venture to China that still needs to be discussed. He had promised Alice, after all. And it would be unforgivable to let a perfectly sound idea go to waste because of his distraction with some ridiculous, anxiety-fueled daydream!
in which Alice and the Hatter have a difference of opinion and Hamish complicates matters

Chapter 3

“Well, now, what’s this?”

Alice glances up at the familiar purr and watches as the air swirls and spins, coloring into a floating cat. A Cheshire Cat.

“Surely I am not seeing a frown,” he drawls playfully, smiling as ever.

“Of course not,” Alice replies, irritated with herself. It’s bad enough that she’d made such a ninny of herself at the ball the night before. There’s no point in compounding the issue by moping about it!

“Ah, yes,” Chessur purrs, twirling in the air so that he is floating on his back. His bright eyes blink once lazily. “I am mistaken. From this perspective, it’s clearly a smile.”

The teasing startles a laugh out of her and Chessur turns right-side-up on a victorious grin of approval.

“Did you barge into my room uninvited so that you could cheer me up?”

“As delightful a happenstance as that is, no,” he admits. “I barged into the room you are using in the White Queen’s castle so that you could grow up.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The cat ignores the burgeoning tone of offense in her voice and muses aloud, “A certain cat with evaporating skills happened upon a discussion taking place downstairs in the queen’s office, in which an Alice was mentioned and her future was being discussed… and decided.” His grin widens. “I just thought you’d like to know.”

And then, with a flick of his tail, disappears.

Alice stares at the place where he’d just been hovering and blinks once, twice, and then launches herself off the window seat and dashes for the door. Her heart pounds and she races down the pristine hallway. Alice swallows against the bitterness of burgeoning betrayal in her throat. Had she not – just a few days ago – faced this very situation at the Ascots’ summer home when her future had been decided without her consent or input? That sort of thing wouldn’t happen here, in Underland, would it? After all, the White Queen had given her a choice, had seemed to support that choice…

Last night, as Alice had stood in awkward, fidget-filled silence beside a very dashing – too dashing, according to the bread-and-butter butterflies Futterwhackening in Alice’s stomach – Hatter (who had been surveying the festivities with an air of satisfaction and peace), the White Queen had drifted over and gently observed, “Alice looks lovely, doesn’t she?”

The Hatter had returned his attention to Alice who had desperately hoped she wasn’t imagining...
the warmth and enthusiasm in his gaze. “Delightfully so!” he’d concurred.

Twirling her lacquer-tipped fingers in the air, the queen had continued, “I shall have to rely on you to lead Alice through our customs.”

“Oh, yes! Of course. You may rely on me, your Majesty. Alice,” the Hatter had lisped at her, making her feel slightly – and embarrassingly – faint. “Would you care for a tour of the ballroom?”

“A tour?” she’d repeated stupidly.

“Or have your feet already been properly introduced to the premises?” His brows had lifted in inquiry and Alice had had to fist her hands to keep from tracing them with her fingertips.

The White Queen had thoughtfully answered for her. “A grave oversight on my part.” The admission had been made without the slightest effort on the queen’s part to manufacture the required remorse. “Would you…?”

“Certainly!” And then the most wonderful, magical thing had happened. The Hatter had held out his arm for Alice to take. “If it pleases you.”

She’d nodded vigorously and shakily slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. They’d wandered in a seemingly aimless path through the throng of celebrants. At one point, the Tweedles had bounced over to them in their squeaky shoes, showing off their smart tailcoats. Nivens had generously complimented Alice’s footwear. Chess had grinned at her and purred, “What have we here? A matching set?”

“We’re not matching…” Alice had protested weakly, hoping with all her might that the Hatter hadn’t overheard that catty rumble.

“Hmm. Not yet at any rate.”

Oh, yes, her face had certainly flamed at that remark. She’d bitten back her protests: yes, she likes the Hatter very much but there’s no rush and, actually, she’s not sure what she’d do if he blatantly returned her affection. Pretending to study the sea of courtiers and craftspeople in attendance had given Alice a moment to cool her cheeks.

Then, suddenly, the Hatter had squealed with delight and surprise

“What is it?” Alice had replied, following his gaze toward the orchestra of platypuses and noting the very interesting happenings taking place in the ballroom in the process: lady after lady had taken the initiative and approached a gentleman, curtsying deeply.

The Hatter had explained, “It’s been quite a while since they’ve played the Lady’s Favorite!”

“Is that what…?” Alice had started to ask as she’d watched one gentleman accept a lady’s invitation to dance. “Lady’s Favorite?” she’d echoed, her mind racing and heart pounding. Could this be her chance to show the Hatter the depth of her regard for him?

“Yes, yes!” the Hatter had replied. “Remarkable that her Majesty would request this song.”

When Alice had glanced back at the orchestra again, she’d seen the queen nodding in time to the long, opening strains of the melody. And then, inexplicably, the White Queen had looked in Alice’s direction and raised her brows expectantly, nodding meaningfully toward Hatter.

Oh!
“Oh, um,” Alice had mumbled, suddenly breathless with panic. “Hatter…?”

“Yes, Alice?”

Hoping she wasn’t about to make a monumental mistake, she had dropped into a deep curtsey.

In that moment, all of Underland had seemed to stop. She’s felt the eyes of everyone present watching her, gaping in silence. Nerves thoroughly wracked, Alice had frantically wondered if Time had suddenly decided to go on a holiday! But the Hatter’s happy giggle had saved her, unlocking her lungs and releasing the tension in her shoulders.

“It would be my pleasure, Alice,” he’d burred softly and the world had started turning again. Time resumed marking the seconds.

Alice had held out her hand as the other women had done and the Hatter had taken it and walked out onto the dance floor with her.

Alice had never been so nervous at a dance. In fact, she had never even asked anyone to dance, most especially not to a dance that she has never done before. When she’d confided this to him, he’d reassured her as he’d placed his hand – so warm! – on her waist, “All you have to do is lead. I will follow.”

Oh, how her heart had pounded then! Why she’d been so busy grinning and brimming with happiness and excitement and enchantment – for he had enchanted her! – that she’d nearly forgotten about the dance entirely. Nearly.

She’d stumbled into a waltz and the Hatter, true to his word, had followed her steps and it had been the most wonderful, the most magical, the most thrilling moment of her life! To share the dance floor with him, to be the only two people in the world, to make that little world all by themselves…!

It had ended too soon. And when the Hatter had glanced toward the beverage tables, Alice – still giddy – had stood on her tiptoes, intending to deliver a swift kiss to his cheek. But he’d turned then, looked back at her, and Alice’s momentum had delivered that kiss not to the safe haven she’d intended. No, their lips had crushed together awkwardly, hers slightly pursed and his in mid-word.

Even now, the memory immolates her with shame. She’s sure she hadn’t imagined hastily subdued giggles and chuckles from the courtiers, perhaps even a Chess-toned groan of disappointment.

It could not have gotten any worse. Except it had.

The Hatter had smiled, patted her shoulder gently, and trilled happily, “Yes, yes, you are natural leader, Alice. But, of course, I knew you would be. Well done! Are you ready for some tea?”

When he’d offered her his arm, she’d taken it, but the gesture had been automatic. She’d been too… struck dumb to do anything else. His words had been like treacle in her mind, miring her thoughts which had been whirling about so happily just a few moments ago.

She’d forced a smile onto her lips and had done her best to ignore the fact that he had not mentioned the ill-timed kiss. He had not acknowledged it at all. It had not even been worth commenting on.

Chessur would be disappointed to see her upside-down smile reappear, but she can’t help it.
Thankfully, she doesn’t have to think about it at the moment. She slows to a brisk stride as the open door to the queen’s library comes into view and voices can be heard from within.

“Hatter, I must insist that this be Alice’s decision.”

“I must rudely disagree, your Majesty. Alice should not see something of this magnitude.”

“It is endearing how you seek to protect her from unpleasantness,” the queen acknowledges, not minding the Hatter’s rudeness at all. “However, she has already fought and killed on our behalf —”

“All the more reason to shield her from this!” he argues back in a tone that is alarmingly high pitched with tension.

Alice pauses on the threshold and takes in the scene before her. The queen is seated at her desk with a tea service nudging her elbow. The hatter is pacing back and forth in front of the room’s large, arched window. Clearing her throat, she steps into the room uninvited and asks, “Shield me from what?”

The Hatter turns toward her and her breath catches at the sight of him. He’d donned his dark suit again and, truly, the mash of colors suits him so much better than white. Even the sight of his stockings – blatantly mismatched – makes her heart swell painfully.

“Alice! Thank you for attending this meeting!” the White Queen praises, looking truly pleased. Not sure of what to say, Alice merely returns her gaze to the Hatter and waits.

When the clock continues to tick and tock with the Hatter clearly not volunteering either further greetings or information, the queen delicately clears her throat and offers, “Tea, Alice? We were just discussing the situation at Salazen Grum.”

“What situation?” Alice asks, frowning at the Hatter.

When he still refuses to explain, the queen interjects yet again, “There is quite an unpleasant mess at my sister’s former castle which requires immediate attention.”

As the words register, Alice looks away from the Hatter and regards the White Queen who is giving her a very significant look. “If you recall, Alice, you alluded to this not long ago over my alchemy table…?”

The Hatter twitches and Alice nods, remembering: “You can’t imagine what goes on in that place…”

She thinks of the heads in the moat and her stomach rolls as she realizes that – just as Marmoreal and the Jabberwocky and the Hatter are real – so are all the corpses floating in the moat of the Red Queen’s former castle. Her knees weakening, she reaches for the cup that queen offers her and sinks down into the nearest chair. One sip, and then another, heats her suddenly cold lips, streaks down her throat and settles her unruly stomach.

“So, we must bury the dead,” Alice deduces.

The queen nods with a sad smile. Even her ever-airborne fingers wilt into weak fists. “Yes. It’s the right thing to do.”

Which means it’s something a champion would do. Or at least see to. It is not said, but Alice understands that this is her responsibility. She whispers thickly, “When are we leaving?”
“No!”

She startles at the Hatter’s sudden exclamation. Turning in her chair, she finds herself confronted by a man’s silhouette, his face darkened by the light from the window behind him, his body fairly vibrating with tension. A very imposing figure, indeed. Imposing, but he’s no Jabberwocky.

Alice sets her teacup on the edge of the queen’s desk and stands. She feels suddenly ashamed of herself for forgetting about all of the people who had died, who she hadn’t saved – hadn’t arrived in time to save!

“Yes,” she informs him, her shame heating until it becomes anger. Alice welcomes it, lets it fill her, fuel her.

“Ye d’nae need teh see whot’s a-muck a’Crims,” he growls darkly.

Tilting her chin stubbornly, she retorts, “I already have. How do you think I got into the castle in the first place? I couldn’t have simply strolled across the drawbridge!”

He stares at her. She cannot see his eyes well, shaded as they are beneath his hat, but his Adam’s apple bobs above his collar.

“I’m going,” she reaffirms. Glancing over her shoulder, she asks the queen, “When are we leaving?”

The White Queen gives her a wan smile. “Just as soon as you’re ready, Alice.”

The Hatter shakes his head and takes a step toward her. “Ye’ll nae gae, Alice. ‘Tis nae place fer —”

“The White Queen’s Champion?” Alice interrupts. She gives him an expectant look. “I ought to be there, Hatter. And I will be.”

She looks at the queen once more. “I’ll be ready in an hour, your Majesty.”

And then she turns on her heel and marches out of the door and back to her borrowed room to prepare a change of clothes.

*~*~*~*~*

It’s tradition, taking a stroll through the country estate’s rose hedges before departing for the city. Hamish takes a deep breath, enjoying the clean air and the clear sky above. London has been well and truly conquered by man and man’s industry – even on rare sunny days, the light is diffused and weak. Not here. Here, man is the guest of nature rather than its master.

It’s a refreshing change, if rather counter-productive.

Hamish sighs as his mood suddenly shifts with the recollection of the proposal he’d delivered over breakfast yesterday. Hamish cannot recall the last time one of his ideas had been so
enthusiastically received by his father, and certainly not an idea pertaining to business. It would have been amusing if it hadn’t stung so much. Expanding trade to China hadn’t been his idea, after all. It had been Alice’s.

He’d always thought her odd, over-imaginative, given to flights of fancy, counter-intuitive. Foolish.

Suddenly, the memory of his talk with Helen Kingsleigh revisits him:

“And just why would you feel compelled to ask for Alice’s hand, Hamish?”

“As a man of sound judgment and solid character, I feel Alice could only benefit from our union, Madam.”

He pauses in the middle of the path, takes a deep breath, and sighs it out. It will do no good to deliberately upset himself. Still, it is a bitter irony, indeed, that he has benefited from Alice and not the other way around. Silly, strange, somewhat mad Alice… and yet brilliant.

Yes, he can see now that he’s always been a bit jealous of Alice, envious of her daring. He fiddles with his pocket watch pocket, removing the timepiece but not bothering to consult it, as he recalls his repeated chastisement of her:

“I had a sudden vision of all the ladies in trousers and the men in dresses.”

“It would be best to keep your visions to yourself. When in doubt, remain silent.”

And then:

“Where is your head?”

“I was wondering what it would be like to fly.”

“Why would you spend your time thinking about such an impossible thing?”

He is a grown man, so he shouldn’t feel what he does now in response to that memory, but he can’t help but recognize it: shame. He feels very ashamed of himself for trying to subdue her marvelous spirit out of spite. He’ll not have the chance to apologize now, although the thought of doing so ties his innards up in very uncomfortable knots.

“No matter!” he mutters, scolding himself for dilly dallying. His mother and father will be departing very soon for town, so he’d best finish his walk and return to the house.

Restowing his pocket watch and straightening his waistcoat, Hamish strides forward, steps around the corner of the hedge and—

Stumbles to a halt.

He stares at the person in front of him, blinking in shock, for this can’t be who his eyes tell him it must be. This young woman in grubby trousers and a dirt-smudged tunic with her long, pale hair tied back and sweat beading across her brow, holding a shovel of all things in her grimy hands cannot be Alice.

This cannot be! Not in the middle of his mother’s rosebushes!

But then she looks up and her brown eyes widen. Her lips part and curve upward.

“Hamish?”
Her smile of welcome warms him even as his confusion still makes him feel adrift. “Alice! What are you doing here?! And why-ever are you digging a hole in the middle of my mother’s rose garden?!”

“Your mother’s…? No, Hamish. I’m not in your mother’s garden. You are in the Red Queen’s courtyard.”

“I… What?!”

Alice sets aside the shovel and pulls a grungy handkerchief from her trouser pocket. Hamish wrinkles his nose as she wipes her brow with the thing, smearing more dirt on herself. “Hamish,” she says, approaching him. “It is good to see you. But how did you get here?”

He glances about, surveying precisely where he is, and frowns. “I haven’t the faintest notion,” he replies, disarmed by his surroundings which are clearly not the maze of rose hedges on the estate. “I was merely strolling through the garden. I turned the corner and then there you were.”

“Remarkable,” Alice murmurs. “I’ve never come to Underland that way before.”

“Underland?”

“Yes, welcome to Underland, Hamish.” She glances around, her smile melting away. “Although, I do wish you’d come at a… happier time.”

Hamish follows her gaze, taking in the rows of very orderly square holes in the earth. He easily counts two dozen stretching off to the left. Turning to the right, he sees several more although they are not yet square. They are messily round and, as he watches, dirt sprays out of the two furthest edifices which must still be in the process of being excavated.

“Alice… what is all this?”

“A graveyard,” she answers softly.

“For whom?” he demands nervousy.

She takes a shuddering breath.

“Alice? Who’s that you’re speaking to?!”

Hamish turns and gapes at a rather large rabbit which is probably white under all that filth. The creature gazes back at Hamish, blinking his large, pink eyes and absently dusting off his waistcoat with a paw.

“This is Hamish. Hamish, this is McTwisp.”

The rabbit inclines his head. “Pleased to make you acquaintance, sir.”

Hamish gurgles something. Perhaps a greeting of some kind.

“Alice,” the rabbit continues, “I realize that we have a guest, but we also have a schedule.”

“I know. Just… I’ll be back shortly.”

“Hm. Very well.”

With that, the rabbit dives back into the hole and dirt once again begins spurting upward. The
second gravedigger had not paused at all during this exchange and Hamish wonders if there’s a talking rabbit in that one, too.

“Let’s take a walk,” Alice invites quietly, waving her arm toward the castle itself.

Unable to think of any objections, Hamish follows without comment. For long moments, they simply wander the red-carpeted halls. He studies the Baroque buttresses above their heads and the carved mahogany doors in silence. Finally, when his need to orient himself eclipses his shock, Hamish demands, “What is this place, Alice? Where are we?”

Her smile is wry. “Well, at the moment, we’re walking through the halls of the former Red Queen’s castle at Salazen Grum. She’s been recently stripped of her powers and exiled, you see. And for the castle itself, it’s located next to the Crimson Sea, in the land of Crims, in the world of Underland which is through the rabbit hole, on the other side of the looking glass, and – apparently – around the corner of a rosebush.”

Hamish sputters a bit but then latches onto one statement in particular. “Did you say ‘on the other side of the looking glass’?”

“I did. Why—?”

Just then, the clack and clatter of a sewing machine intrudes on their conversation. Alice halts suddenly, her eyes on the single door standing open at the end of the hall. She puts out a hand, signaling Hamish to stop. “This way,” she whispers, nodding to a staircase.

Frowning over his shoulder at the door Alice clearly wishes to avoid, he mounts the stairs with her. It seems like they climb forever. When at last they emerge onto a stone parapet, Hamish gapes at the view of the ocean stretching out toward the horizon. He leans his hands against the edge of the battlement and says, wonderingly, “This… is not England.”

“No, it isn’t,” Alice answers, her tone softened with sadness and strengthened with pride.

“How will I get back?” he asks, truly concerned now.

After a moment, Alice admits, “I don’t know. But I’ve been here several times and a way always presents itself. Whether or not you take it, is up to you.”

“Well, when it appears, I would appreciate it if you would point it out to me, Alice. And, speaking of which, do you know how worried your mother and sister are? Really, you ought to return with me.”

“Maybe I ought to,” she replies, turning toward the sea and allowing the wind to blow the escaped strands of hair away from her face, “but I won’t. I can’t. I’ve made my choice.”

Hamish scoffs. “Your choice! Alice—!”

“No, Hamish,” she informs him, her voice so weighted with authority and… something else that he finds he can’t argue with her. Irritated, he turns away from the view and endeavors to take stock of all that he can see from each direction.

“Hamish…?” he hears Alice say to his back. And then she shouts, “No! Hamish, don’t look that way!”

Contrarily, he speeds up, reaching the edge of battlement as Alice’s dirty hand grips his very clean shirt sleeve. First, he sees only a desolate, rolling desert. Dead trees hunch mournfully beside dried-up river and creek beds. Beyond those, a frightful canyon rises out of the earth and thrusts
toward the cloudless sky.

Yes, this is clearly *not* England.

And then he looks down.

For a moment, he doesn’t comprehend what he sees. Man-sized, animated, white chess pieces appear to be working in the castle moat, pulling round-ish objects from it and placing them in a line upon the ground. It’s not until a pair of these strange beings hauls what appears to be a torso with its arms and legs attached out of the muck that he realizes what it is he’s seeing.

He gags, pivots away from the scene and scrambles for a handkerchief which he presses to his too-warm, too-wet, and suddenly too-sour mouth.

Alice, however, merely releases his arm and stares downward.

He cannot fathom how she can stand the sight of all those heads, decayed and rotting and—!

If bile were not so very insistent on flooding his mouth, he would have scolded her, ordered her away from the wall.

“I couldn’t save them,” she says as he pants quietly into the linen held to his nose and mouth. “I was too late.”

Taking a deep breath, Hamish firmly orders his stomach to settle. It does. “What are you talking about, Alice?” he snaps.

“I could have saved them,” she rephrases, her hands fisting on the top of the stone wall. “If I’d only come sooner, killed the Jabberwocky sooner, I could have…” She shakes her head. Her shoulders slump. “I could have saved them, but I didn’t.”

Hamish cannot comprehend her guilt, but that it is affecting her profoundly, yes he can comprehend that. “Come away, Alice,” he chokes out. “Let us go back inside.”

She sighs. “Yes, the Hatter will be finished with the shrouds soon. Then they’ll start carrying the bodies to the graves and… yes. There’s work to be done.”

They make their way back downstairs in silence. When they arrive on the ground floor, Hamish notes the utter silence in the hall. He glances up toward the room Alice had wished to avoid and gasps when he sees a man with wild orange hair upon which has been perched a very dark and tattered top hat and—

The man seems to sense his gaze. He pauses in the act of leaving the room, his arms piled high with folded sheets. No, not bed linens. These are the shrouds Alice had mentioned which means this man – the very man Hamish had seen dancing with a white-gowned Alice through the looking glass yesterday morning – is the Hatter.

Only a moment behind him, Alice enters the hall and then glances in the direction in which Hamish faces, frozen with realization. Beside him, Alice stiffens. Down the hall, the Hatter stiffens. Then, with a toothy smile and a flash of eyes that couldn’t have changed color just then, the man pivots very deliberately on the heel of his battered boot and strides toward them.

“Alice!” he calls out, lisping her name. “What have we here?” Stomping to a halt directly in their path, the man muses aloud, “I’ve never seen a dodo of such stature!”

Hamish feels his eyes widen and his face heat. Why of all the impertinent—!
“Hatter, this is Hamish from Above.”

“From Above?” the Hatter echoes. “So you’ve dropped in for a visit, just like our Alice?”

Noting the proprietary tone in the overly pale and dreadfully orange man’s voice, Hamish mulishly thrusts out his right hand. “How do you do?”

The Hatter, however, makes no move to grasp the offered hand. Instead, he stares at the sleeve of Hamish’s shirt, thrust forward as it is with his gesture of greeting. Hamish glances down and notices four very distinct streaks of dirt on the fabric in the exact shape and size as Alice’s fingers.

Rounding on her, the Hatter growls, “Where woul’ye ha’found sae much earth in th’ library tha’ I asked ye teh clean aut?”

Fire flashes in Alice’s eyes. “You mean the library that you ordered me to clean out, which was ridiculous! McTwisp and Thackery needed help. You can’t expect a rabbit and a hare to dig dozens of graves all by themselves!”

Quick as a serpent’s strike, the Hatter’s hand darts out from under the mound of fine wool and grasps Alice’s wrist. “Ye should’a heeded me, lass. These hands’re no’meant fer gravework.”

“Well, that’s all they’re good for at the moment.”

The man’s eyes flash, simmer red-ly then fizzle to a disturbing yellow. “A champion’s hands’re meant’eh save lives—”

“I’ll decide what my own hands are good for, thank you very much!”

Alice twists her wrist from his grasp and the motion alerts Hamish to the fact that he has – thus far – been very remiss in his duties as Alice’s friend. He steps between them and, glaring down his nose at the Hatter, drawls, “Alice, simply say the word and I’ll handle this for you.”

Alice asserts from behind his shoulder, “I do not—!”

“Oh, handle this will ye?” the Hatter snarls. “An’ jus’who d’ye think ye be to auwr Alice?”

“I’m Miss Kingsleigh’s fiancé,” he proclaims vindictively, thrusting up his chin.

The hall echoes with the resulting silence.

Surprisingly, the Hatter takes a step back and nods. “Then I’m puttin’ ye in charge o’ makin’ sure she d’s a she’s been told!” He glares past Hamish’s shoulder, presumably, at Alice. “Nae muir gravework!”

And then he utilizes the worn heels on his battered boots once more, pivoting smartly and marching down the hall.

Hamish glances over his shoulder at Alice and catches her expressive flinch when the door at the end of the hall slams shut. Taking a deep breath, she spear him in place with her dark gaze and informs him in a dangerous tone, “You are not my fiancé.”

For a moment, he can only stare as Alice storms down the hall, back in the direction of the grave-filled garden.

“Alice!” he hisses, thoroughly irritated. “I just interceded on your behalf! Why, that man was clearly mad and you—”
“That’s why they call him ‘the Mad Hatter’!” she calls back over her shoulder.

“Alice—!”

His additional protest is cut off as Alice pauses in the archway leading outside, turns back to him and nearly shouts, “And yes, sometimes he’s mad! We all are here! Crazy, mad, wonderful—” Hamish startles at the sight of tears gathering in her eyes. “All the best people are!” she concludes and sits down on the step in the sunlight.

Hamish regards her for a moment as she rubs the back of her hand over her cheeks. He recalls the moment he’d witnessed in the mirror and the emotions that had been utterly clear on Alice’s face. Her adoration as she’d twirled in the Hatter’s arms, her humiliation when their lips had met in that clumsy kiss, and her crushing disappointment when the Hatter had merely given her a pat and a seemingly flippant response. When Hamish hears Alice sniffle, he moves forward and seats himself on the step beside her.

“Alice, I… I’m…” He flounders for words.

“Damn it, Hamish. Take your own advice for once,” she huffs. “When in doubt, remain silent!” And then she leans her head against his shoulder.

He suspects that there are muddy tears staining his shirt sleeve, joining the streaks of dirt she’d left from her hand, but he doesn’t care. Sighing, he leans his cheek against her head, not understanding when that only makes her sob harder.

He closes his eyes and gathers his wits. He can still think of nothing to say, so he does as she’d asked. He says nothing. The sounds of graves being dug, and of the wind in the trees, assail him. A breeze blows past them, tickling his nose. Hamish does his best to manfully restrain the sneeze he feels coming, but he can’t.

“So—” He would have apologized properly for the wholly inappropriate interruption if he’d had time, but—

“Ah-chooooo!!!”

Hamish scrambles for a handkerchief to tend to his suddenly leaking nose – blasted allergies! – but when he opens his eyes, he finds himself standing in the intersection of two paths in his mother’s rose garden. There is no Alice leaning on his shoulder, no strange castle surrounding him, no graves being dug…

For a second, Hamish simply gapes at the utterly dull and familiar hedges. What had just happened? Had he daydreamed again?

A cold trickle tickles his upper lip and Hamish hurriedly applies his handkerchief to his nose, blowing it soundly. Nose tended, handkerchief inspected, folded, and tucked away, Hamish eyes his path suspiciously, wondering if he might walk right into the Hatter should he take a single step…

“Hamish!”

His heart leaps into his throat, his head jerks around and for one wild instant he wonders if that’s Alice standing there at the other end of the hedge row…

But no. Not it isn’t. Of course not.
He takes a steadying breath before replying. “Mother?”

“We’re ready to leave,” she informs him, and then she waits right where she is, clearly expecting him to accompany her back to the house forthwith. Gritting his teeth, he admits that there’s no point in lollygagging around here. Alice – or his vision of her – is long gone.

“Yes, my apologies for the delay,” he offers, walking toward her.

Her sharp gaze moves over him and her nose wrinkles. Hamish follows her gaze and feels his heart stop in his chest.

“And now you’ve made us even later,” she informs him waspishly. “Come and put on a clean shirt before we leave.”

She turns and, skirts swishing, makes her way toward the house. Numbly, Hamish follows. His mind is only capable of one thought at the moment, one task. It is thoroughly preoccupied with the fact that there are dirty streaks on his white shirtsleeve, dirty streaks in the exact shape and size of Alice’s fingers.

Impossible.

Or rather, it _should_ be.
in which graves are dug and dinner guests arrive uninvited

Chapter 4

“Alice…”

Recognizing that lisp instinctively, Alice flinches away from Hamish’s shoulder and struggles to pull her handkerchief out of her back pocket, but she seems to be sitting on it. Sniffling and swearing under her breath, she wrestles with the length of Marmoreal White cloth, pausing only when a familiar swatch of bright pink flutters in front of her nose.

Slowly, as if expecting it to be whipped out of range at any moment, Alice reaches for the Hatter’s offered handkerchief.

“Thank you,” she mumbles, her dirty fingers closing around it.

With a sigh, the Hatter sits down beside her on the wide step. The move is so startling that the half-formed thought she experiences of Hamish – who ought to still be sitting on her other side – vanishes completely.

As she scrubs at her cheeks and nose, she watches the Hatter warily. His shoulders are rounded with contrition and his green gaze flickers in her direction from beneath his hat. “You should be very welcome, Alice,” he lisps.

“I should be?” she echoes, confused.

His hands, shroud-free, rest on his thighs, his thimbled and bandaged fingertips tip-tapping against the taut fabric of his trousers. “Yes, I would very much like for you to feel welcome here. You ought to feel welcome here, in Underland, Alice. But, coming here… seeing this…” Gazing at the still-empty graves, he shakes his head and concludes unhappily, “Well, it’s no wonder you’re so leaky.”

“I’m not crying because of… that,” she informs him, her heart warming at his obvious concern and apologetic manner.

The Hatter looks up and studies her face. Without a word, he gently retrieves his handkerchief from her grasp and begins dabbing at her forehead, where she’s sure she must be very filthy. “As I suspected,” he replies, his lips trembling with sadness. “I am sorry we differed, but we are different, you and I.”

Alice feels her lips curl into a weak smile. “Yes, I know. But we are also alike, are we not?”

“In some respects,” he allows, collecting her nearest hand and delicately working on clearing the soil from her knuckles and the underside of her fingernails. “It’s unavoidable. Differing as well. I’d forgotten. It’s been so long since I had someone to differ with… I’m afraid I’m quite out of practice.”

“Must we make a habit of it?” Alice asks, seeking out his gaze.

His eyes, a lovely green, focus madly on her. She can’t help but smile wider at his lazy eye which
is just slightly off kilter.

“Habits are dreadfully stubborn things, Alice. Once made, it’s very difficult to break them.”

“Which is why we must only make good habits,” she lectures.

He makes a happy noise of agreement in the back of his throat and gestures for her other hand. As Alice complies with his mute request, she glances over her shoulder to where Hamish should be sitting.

But isn’t.

She blinks.

“It looks as if he caught the breeze after all,” the Hatter observes, tending to Alice’s other hand. Turning back around, Alice meets his brief glance. “Back to where he came from.”

“Can a person leave Underland in such a manner?”

“Of course! It’s quite easy to do. Unless you have an invitation.”

“An invitation?”

“Yes, yes!” he replies turning her hand this way and that as he buffs her nails in the sunshine. “And you needn’t worry that yours has been withdrawn, Alice. I said you could stay and you may; stay as long as you like.” Giving her thumb a final— but gentle—scrubbing, he tilts his head to the side and nods with a hum of satisfaction.

“Thank you,” she murmurs as he holds out her hand reverently to her, as if offering her a hat.

“You are welcome, Alice.”

She hates to ruin the moment by causing another row, but… Sighing, she glances toward the garden and the graves she’d promised to help McTwisp and Thackery dig.

“Go on, then,” the Hatter tells her quietly.

Startled, she turns toward him and studies his expression: his kind eyes and fluffy eyebrows and gently smiling lips.

“But,” he continues merrily, gesturing eloquently as he stands, “we shall have to have tea when this is all done and over with.” He holds out a hand for her to take, which she does, and assists her to her feet. “That’s the only way to put truly unpleasant things back in the past from whence they’d come.”

Alice would have leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek for that except, well, the last time she’d tried such a maneuver, things hadn’t ended very well. For a moment, they simply face each other in the archway, her hands held in the Hatter’s. And then he nods again and moves toward the hallway, no doubt intending to see to the shrouds.

Feeling his warm, rough hands slip out from under hers, Alice calls out softly, “Hatter!”

“Yes, Alice?”

She smiles at his courteous lisp and attentive expression, marveling at how easily he can make her feel special and, well, welcome. Seeking to return the favor, and assuage the urging of her heart to Tell-him-tell-him-tell-him! how she feels, Alice confides, “I’m glad to be here, with you.”
“As am I,” he replies. “As am I.”

It’s with a smile that Alice returns to the significantly more holey garden and picks up her shovel. She regards the handle of the implement for a moment, letting the happy feeling inside her swell. Anywhere else, she might have wrapped her arms around herself and twirled — perhaps a time and a half! — but here, now, she merely sighs out the emotion and returns to squaring up the holes her friends had dug.

She works as pawns and knights begin carrying the shroud wrapped bodies — now united with their once-lost heads — and lowing them with meticulous care into each grave. Alice tries not to look too hard at the wrappings, tries not to imagine the Hatter’s hands quickly but delicately tucking in the ends around each body. Her chest tightens at the thought of him conducting such a terrible symphony all alone, but she doesn’t dare leave her post to go and find him, help him. He’d led the Resistance, or so McTwisp and Uilleam the Dodo Bird had educated her at the ball. These are his dead as much as they are Alice’s. Perhaps more so.

“How ironic,” she muses to the earth clinging to the edge of her shovel. “I thought I was fleeing responsibility when I decided to stay…” And yet she continually discovers more and more of it. As she returns to the task of hollowing out the graves, making their roundness square, she wonders — for the first time — what will be expected of her next, although she can guess.

Her smile and the warmth within her chest melts away as, one by one, the shroud-swathed dead are brought into the garden for burial. She does her best to work mindlessly, to not let the guilt catch up to her. But she can hear McTwisp announcing one officious-sounding eulogy after another over the sound of her spade and Thackery’s continued digging. As the afternoon wanes it begins to occur to her that this is not the end of the recovery which Underland requires. There are other places — homes and villages — and people’s lives that had been damaged by the Red Queen’s reign. As a champion, is it not her responsibility to see those restored wherever possible?

Her fingers go numb at the thought of that awesomely — frightfully! — large task. Clutching the handle of the shovel in her aching, raw, blistering hands, she chokes out to her companion.

“That’s deep enough, Thackery. Start a new one now.”

Muttering about deep thoughts and fresh starts, he scrambles out of the round-ishly shaped grave, measures off three hare paces and starts ripping up the sod for a new hole.

She gazes across the garden, watching as another body is laid to rest. She listens as another eulogy is pronounced. No, this is not the end of the recovery. This is only the beginning.

The proposal reads logically, with a stately and refined tone. Fully satisfied with it, Hamish straightens himself in his office chair and, with a self-important flick of his wrist, signs his name at the conclusion of the document. Yes, he’d been right to take his time in drafting this formal proposal. Over the last week, the inquiries he’d made into China and its customs had helped him refine Alice’s mad idea into a concept that might truly be more profitable than bewildering.
“That’s fine work,” he assesses, regarding the lines of delicate calligraphy that he’d penned. Hamish relishes the accomplishment. This may not have been his original idea, but he has made it better, something Alice – wherever she is now – would not have been capable of. Perhaps it’s a bit petty to take so much pride in improving an idea not his own.

“This is progress,” he declares to himself firmly. Yes, progress, not pettiness.

At the thought of progress made and yet to be pursued, he recalls the garden of graves in that Underplace – or whatever it’s called! – and the purely nonsensical assumption he’d made that he’d actually seen Alice and spoken to her, that he’d actually met a mad hatter or been introduced to a talking rabbit or watched great, automated chess pieces at work.

“Impossible,” he insists, but he doesn’t glance at his now-clean shirt sleeve in memory. Nor does he dare a glance at the looking glass in the corner of his office. Impossible things ought to remain impossible, Hamish has decided. He’ll not go out of his way to indulge in such ludicrous fantasies. Why, if this sort of oddly vivid daydream happens again, he’ll make an appointment with a physician forthwith! It’s one thing for Alice to be capable of some sort of magic or other; it’s quite another for it to foist itself upon him!

Standing, Hamish shrugs into his jacket and then collects his folio case. According to his stomach, which is woefully empty, it’s the end of the workday. He strides from his small office and down the hall to the cavernous room which accommodates the apprentices’ workstations.

“Mr. Bailey,” he announces, startling a very droopy-eyed clerk.

“Yes, sir?” the young man squeaks, sitting upright so abruptly his plain, wooden chair squeaks.

Consulting the clock, Hamish says, “I’ve left a proposal on my desk concerning this new venture to China. I require that three copies be made.”

“Of course, sir.”

“And take special care with your penmanship, Mr. Bailey. These copies are meant for the investors.”

“I understand, sir.”

Satisfied with both the response and the attentiveness with which it had been delivered, Hamish collects his summer coat, hat, and walking stick from the employee coatrack. The sense of relief he feels upon having them once again in his possession is significant. Were his office but a little larger, he would have been able to keep them there. Well, perhaps this proposal and its successful implementation will lead him to being offered a larger office, one with a window, a coatrack, and a small stove for warmth. At the moment, only the latter luxury has been installed in his cramped work quarters.

As he departs the trade company offices, Hamish lectures himself not to build up his expectations. The venture to China may not be as lucrative as he hopes it will. Any number of disasters – natural or political – could interfere.

“Or the entire enterprise could be smooth sailing,” he acknowledges in silence. The anticipation and uncertainty is not beneficial for his aching stomach, however.

Resolutely turning his mind to other topics, Hamish strides past darkened shop windows. He listens to the sound of taxi cabs clattering past, drivers shouting to their horses. It’s a typical London evening, right down to the gas lanterns spitting and sputtering along the street. He allows himself to anticipate this evening’s dinner. Today is Friday, which means he can expect a very
nice roast with a predictable assortment of boiled vegetables. His stomach gurgles in anticipation.

Indeed, he very nearly runs up the steps of his house-in-town, tosses his things at the butler, and splashes through his regular toilet routine. In fact, he’s still retying his cravat as he approaches the dining room door. Setting his elbow (rather than his hand) against the door – very improper but there’s no one looking on! – he pushes it open and—

Hamish stumbles to a halt on the threshold, wide-eyed and pulse racing.

_Not this again!_

His soft groan of dismay and the impatient growl of his stomach seem to echo in the dining room, but neither of its current occupants looks up.

Alice once again stands before him, only now she looks very tired and worn in a tunic that has, very clearly, been hastily washed and hard-worn too many times. She is not looking in his direction, however, but toward the head of the table. Helplessly, Hamish shifts his gaze in that direction and feels his lips compress as he confirms the identity of the figure he’d glimpsed out of the corner of his eye: the Hatter, who is very madly banging things about upon the white linen covered table.

Alice reaches out to him, her expression beseeching.

The Hatter dodges her grasp with a grand sweep of his arm and shakes his head so vigorously that his orange hair whips this way and that.

Alice straightens, fisting her hands, and Hamish suddenly wishes – very fervently – to hear her give that mad rotter a sound talking to!

“—well I can’t refuse!” Hamish suddenly hears Alice reply curtly.

“Why-ever not?” the Hatter counters. “Not even the White Queen gets everything she wants.”

“This isn’t about her wanting me to accompany her around Underland! This is my duty!”

“Duty!” he scoffs. “Ye’re a guest ‘ere in this land. Ye’ve nae duties a’that!”

“Maybe I don’t want to be a guest! Maybe I want to belong here! Maybe I want to do something that doesn’t involve fighting a monster and killing it!”

The Hatter slams his fist upon the table and a silver fork glints in the lamplight as it flips over the man’s arm and clatters to the floor. The Hatter growls, “This is not your responsibility.”

“It’s the responsibility of the queen’s champion.”

“You ought to disregard her royal ramblings! Meddling, manipulative monarch!”

“So why are you so angry?”

Hamish holds his breath as the Hatter stands stock-still, glaring at Alice. And then he storms toward the door at the other end of the room brushing past Alice in furious silence.

“Hatter…” she calls softly, but he doesn’t pause.

And then—!

The door separating the dining room and the kitchen, the very one that the Hatter is still a half
dozen paces away from, swings open. Hamish blinks at the dour face of Mrs. Martin, his long-time cook of comfortingly predictable and mildly spiced recipes.

“Sir, dinner is served at your convenience.”

Hamish gapes at the woman for a moment and then glances around the room. Alice and the Hatter are gone. Struggling to calm his racing pulse and swallowing down his dismay – that inexplicable madness had invaded his life yet again! – Hamish clears his throat before replying in the blandest tone he can manage, “Now is convenient.”

Mrs. Martin disappears with a nod and Hamish warily moves toward the place setting at the head of the table, right where the Hatter had fumed and blustered at Alice who had rather spectacularly fumed and blustered back. He places his hand on the back of the chair, intending to seat himself, when something catches his eye.

There, in the corner of the room, lies a silver fork. Hamish tells himself there is another reason for why it is resting there. And surely there must be a different – a sane! – reason for why its tines appear to be bent.
in which the Hatter promises marzipan and Hamish encounters a smiling cat

Chapter 5

Alice hates the Red Queen’s castle. Every corridor looks exactly like the one Stayne had cornered her in and the memory makes her skin crawl. Every carpet looks exactly like the one in the Red Queen’s throne room, upon which the Hatter had clinked and clanked in his chains and had knelt with grim determination – and then sudden, mind-racing panic when he’d spotted Alice there! – and confronted his fate. Every door looks exactly like the one that had led to the Hatter’s hastily assembled workshop and that memory makes her heart race.

She takes a deep breath, recalling the speed with which his hands had worked, his fingers tucking and trimming nimbly. She remembers his bout of madness and then his expression (which had sought something from her that, even now, she feels she had not properly given him) and she recalls his smile when she’d daringly placed his hat upon his head. At the time, she hadn’t expected a kiss in return, for she had not meant the gesture to be coy as it often is Above, but if she had been the right, proper sized Alice, would he have leaned in and pressed his smiling lips to hers?

She will never know.

In general, it’s best to avoid corridors, carpets and doorways due to the memories they call forth. Alice makes her way back to the garden, which is now a graveyard, and wanders among the mounds of freshly-tilled earth. She keeps to the undisturbed strips of grass and does her best to allow the silence and peace of this garden of souls to settle her mind.

The moon is still bright tonight despite the fact that it has been nearly two weeks since the eve of Frabjous Day, but perhaps the moon is bright every night here? She supposes she could ask, but wonders if it might be better to simply let Underland show her the answer to this mystery, night by night, until she understands. And there are still so many things that she doesn’t understand. Most of them have something to do with the Hatter.

He’s out here, she knows. She’d seen him leave the castle kitchen at the conclusion of their argument, had watched him storm down the hall toward the nearest entrance to the garden courtyard.

“Give him a moment,” the White Queen – arrived just that afternoon in her white carriage and with several dozen soldiers – had advised when Alice had attempted to follow him.

Alice had nodded, frowned, and wondered why he again appears to be upset at the thought of Alice taking on more responsibility. Of course she hadn’t wanted to accept the Queen’s invitation to tour Underland and look in on its still-recovering citizens. Of course she’d wanted to stay with the Hatter. She’d wanted to help him pull down the castle walls and fill in the moat. She’d wanted more sunsets spent standing atop the parapet, gazing out at the Crimson Sea and the setting sun. But the queen’s seemingly off-handed comment – “A champion has many duties.” – had rather made the choice for her.
Spying the Hatter’s figure in the light of the moon, she meanders toward him. Her heart pounds. Oh, how she doesn’t want to quarrel again. In fact, they’d been getting along so well this week! Until the White Queen had arrived, that is.

She recalls the whispered Hatter-ish riddles and her own Upland-made stories they’d shared by candlelight after dinner, one evening after the next, chasing away each other’s ghosts with laughter and cold tea. Yes, when the sun had set and the day’s work had been done at last, she’d had him – this crazy, mad, wonderful companion – all to herself. There had been no more shouting, no more furious tirades. She’d assumed that they’d resolved the issue of what Alice ought and ought not do. It had certainly seemed distant then!

But oh how close it is now.

She dejectedly wonders if they are destined to repeat their arguments time and time again, until the end of Underland. Have the two of them been cursed? Or is this only as complicated as a garden-variety bad habit-in-the-making?

Pausing beside the Hatter now, Alice studies his profile, notes the tension still stringing him taut, and sets aside all her questions and accusations and whispers, “You know I wish I could stay…”

“When stay,” he whispers back so simply.

In answer, Alice reaches for his hand. She half expects to be rebuked, but his fingers clutch hers with nearly painful strength.

“I’ve lost so many friends, Alice,” he breathes, choking on the words. The graves surrounding them attest to the truth of that, speaking eloquently with their silence.

She considers advising him to not push away the few friends that remain to him. She nearly tells him not to worry; nothing will happen to her during the White Queen’s tour. She almost asks him why he is consumed by fear now when the battle has already been won. “I’m your friend,” she wants to say but the words – so inadequate compared to what she really feels for this man – get tangled up in her throat.

“I’m considering things that begin with the letter M,” Alice says instead.

After a moment, the Hatter giggles helplessly and queries, “Muffins?”

“Milliner.”

“Maiden?”

“Marzipan.”

He sighs happily, his grip at last gentling on Alice’s hand. “Ah yes. A milliner, a maiden, and marzipan muffins.”

Smiling, Alice cheekily wonders, “Would that happen to be an invitation to tea?”

“Well, since you rhymed so nicely…”

Biting her lip to hold back her laughter, Alice playfully bumps his shoulder with hers. “You won’t forget, will you? I may be gone awhile…”

“How could I forget?” he chides her gently, squeezing her hand once.
For a moment more, Alice simply enjoys having him here, next to her, holding onto her. But of course – like all the other warm moments they’ve shared that have ever renewed Alice’s hope and affections for him – it must end.

“Come, Alice. It’s late and your start on the morrow will be as well if you don’t retire soon.”

Alice accepts his offered arm and lets him escort her to the room she’d claimed during their stay here. He lisps her a “good night” and “pleasant dreams” and then heads for his own room. As she closes the door, Alice dares to think that perhaps she had made him feel better just now. Perhaps this business of saying the Right Thing is not as difficult as she’d always thought.

Turning on a sigh, Alice moves toward her bed and pauses at the sight of the white doublet, tunic, and breeches laid out upon it. Yes, on the morrow, the White Queen’s Champion will accompany Underland’s reigning monarch. She’s excited about the journey, but unhappy about leaving the Hatter. The emotions swirl within her as she lies abed, staring up at the ceiling until her exhaustion at last overcomes the confused and anxious churning of her stomach and she sleeps.

The next morning, she rushes through her bathing and dresses quickly, hoping to catch a moment with the Hatter before her departure. Unfortunately, the instant she opens her bedroom door (her pack of well-used and very abused clothing tucked under her arm), her escort announces with much authority, “Well it’s about time yah done woke up! C’mon, Champion, yah’ve got a carriage teh catch.”

“Mallyumkun,” Alice begins. “How are—”

“Irritated!” the dormouse shouts.

Deciding it might be better to not ask after the reason for her aggravation, Alice merely allows the dormouse to lead the way.

“I got ‘er!” Mally calls, racing into the castle’s central courtyard.

Squinting against the glare of the sun, Alice jogs to keep up. The morning light reflects off the white armor of the assembled guard and her own uniform, making her eyes water. As Mally leaps up the carriage steps and bounds inside, Alice focuses on the man who is standing at the door, presumably holding it open.

“Hatter,” she breathes, hating herself for sleeping so late and forfeiting the chance to spend just one more private moment with him.

He smiles. “Alice.” And then he holds out at handkerchief-wrapped bundle to her. As she unfolds a corner of it to peek at the contents, he lisps, “I’m afraid it’s not marzipan nor a muffin —”

Alice feels a wide grin stretch her lips as she identifies a squimberry scone. Looking up at him, she dares to reach out a hand and dust off the bit of baking flour that’s stubbornly clinging to his bowtie. “Well,” she replies, “we’ll save those marzipan muffins for next time, shall we?”

“Most certainly!”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Looking back to it,” he corrects her and she grins as that distinction does, indeed, make perfect sense. It maybe forward in the future, but it’ll likely be back at Marmoreal when they meet again.

Before she can reply, he half-steps forward – just as he had on the battlefield not two weeks ago –
and lisps softly in her ear, “Fairfarren, Alice.”

Leaning her cheek against his, she closes her eyes, breathes deeply, allows her heart to race and words to tangle in her throat as his scent – a little flour-dusty and a little soapy and utterly him – destroys her composure.

With a dumb nod and stupid smile, she forces herself to climb into the carriage. In the next instant, the door closes and Alice watches the Hatter’s flippant wave as he signals for the driver to begin their journey. Alice can’t help watching the Hatter through the window, even giving him a small wave before the carriage rolls across the drawbridge and onto the dusty road.

When she finally turns back around in her seat, she takes in Mally’s disgruntled scowl and Mirana’s knowing grin, and blushes furious.

“Wipe tha’ luv-sickly look off yer face!” Mally scolds.

The White Queen wags a pale, lacquer-tipped forefinger at the self-appointed captain of the White Guard. “Tsk tsk tsk! Absence makes the heart grow fonder!”

Amazingly, Alice feels her blush heat even further. In all honesty, she isn’t sure if her heart can grow any fonder of the Hatter. “Shall we go over the agenda, your Majesty?” Alice asks a bit desperately, eager to refocus her companions’ attention.

“Alice, my dear champion,” the White Queen sighs, a whimsical smile curving her dark lips, “whatever makes you think we have one?”

Alarmed, Alice glances at Mally, who shrugs helplessly.

Alice sighs. Oh, yes, it’s going to be a very noticeably long while before she sees the Hatter again, much to her dismay.

*~*~*~*

The wharf office had not been located where Hamish had expected it to be. He blames this inconvenience on the directions his father had absentmindedly given him over dessert the night before rather than any mental unsoundness on Hamish’s part. True, he hadn’t sought out a physician’s counsel after that very odd scene in the dining room, but he’d been glancing in mirrors, turning corners, and opening doors with one eye open for the past month and the wariness seems to be worth it. His stomach may be tied up and twisted in constant knots of tension, but he remains firmly in the here and now of London.

Unfortunately, it is the here aspect of that proposition which is giving him the most trouble.

“Blast,” he mutters, glancing around for perhaps the twentieth time since disembarking from Mark Street Station. The narrow, twisting streets crowded by low, squatting buildings do not lend themselves to assisting visitors with orienting themselves. He’s doubly irritated because he can hear the bustle of a wharf-side street very nearby, but he cannot locate it! And, unfortunately, the denizens of this neighborhood do not give the impression that they’d obligingly direct him toward
his intended destination.

He glances to his left and sniffs disdainfully at the shop which claims to be a purveyor of teas. Oh, he doesn’t doubt that they serve custom, but he suspects that it’s not the sugar cubes that draw in the crowds.

It’s hard to imagine anyone spending any length of time voluntarily in this particular neighborhood. Not only has the soot from the industrial houses settled on the clapboard storefronts, clay roofing tiles, and greasy, muck-caked cobblestones, but the entire place reeks of a stomach-lurching combination of rotten fish guts and human waste. Hamish does his best to time his breaths with the northerly wind, which manages to shove the stink back toward the Thames where it belongs.

Keeping a very close eye on his pocket watch and billfold, Hamish strides as quickly as he dares upon the slippery street, his head tilted at a purposeful angle. It is because of this very display of aloofness that Hamish very nearly tips over the cat which darts across his path.

Cursing, Hamish spins adroitly (thanking his fondness for the Quadrille as he does so), his folio case nearly slapping a filthy, drunken sailor in the vicinity. The man laughs at Hamish’s near fall, mocking him with a bit of hand-flapping and a few wobbly-kneed steps. “Di’the li’l puss giv’yah a start, gov?”

Ignoring the man, Hamish glares after the cat – either naturally grey or eternally soot-stained – which trots pompously toward an alley. It pauses on the corner and turns, looking back at Hamish and studying him with shockingly bright green eyes, eyes that are nearly a variety of blue. And it is because Hamish is still staring at the beast that a movement at the other end of the alley catches his attention. A driver’s shout echoes over the din of the street at midmorning and what appears to be a very large wagon – and not an alley’s dead end – rolls away, revealing a street bustling with commerce beyond.

Hamish breathes a sigh of relief as he realizes that he must have turned too soon after the tube station for this road at the other end of the alley looks like East Smithfield, where the wharf offices are located.

Although the alley is a bit dingy, it is passable so Hamish makes a sharp turn and hurries toward it. He glances down at the cat as he passes. Rather than scamper off to annoy some other passerby, it turns its wide, round face up to him and—

No. No, no, Hamish tells himself firmly. That fat, grey-on-grey tabby cat had not just smiled at him.

“Impossible,” he mutters, shaking off the very notion as he clutches his walking stick tightly and wastes no time in leaving that gutter-crowd and their sordid street behind him.

Emerging in the wonderfully sane atmosphere of commercial enterprise, Hamish dodges several piles of equine progress and turns westward. After only a short walk, he spots the wharf office placard and breathes a sigh of relief. He pauses to let two boys hauling a crate on a handcart pass and then jogs up the steps. As he opens the door, Hamish feels the weight of a gaze upon him, burning into his back.

With a frown, he glances back at the street and—

No, it can’t be.

But it very much looks like the tabby cat from the alley is now perched on a wagon parked on the
opposite side of the street. The creature stares at Hamish with its preternaturally green eyes, its tail curling and uncurling around its legs.

Hamish gives himself a shake. The very idea that a cat of all things would start following him around is – “Ridiculous,” he huffs and allows the door to close behind him.

“Good morning, sir,” a clerk greets him solicitously and Hamish further relaxes at the predictable, banal pleasantries. “How may I assist you?”

“I’m here to secure a berth for a vessel,” he begins. The encounter goes as his father had described it would. As he’d already put together all the necessary details beforehand, the arrangements are made smoothly. There’s only one point which makes him pause.

“And the name of the vessel, sir?”

Hamish clears his throat. “The Wonder,” he replies, still marveling that his father had been so enchanted by the name. This had been Hamish’s own idea. He’d rather liked the thought of naming the vessel in memory of Alice’s grand idea but he had been unable to come up with a single name that seemed suitably fantastical. “What would Alice call it, I wonder?” he’d mused to his shoes as he’d tied them on his feet one morning, and then his mind had leapt forward to that very conclusion: Wonder. Yes, as he can only wonder what Alice would think of all this, it is a fitting name, indeed. His father had praised his imagination. Even now, Hamish has to fight the heat rising up from his collar. Rather than an abundance of imagination, the name of the ship is the result of a noticeable dearth of it.

However, this is not the place, nor the time, for imagination. Hamish concludes his business, receives a promise from the clerk to confirm the arrangements and send on the details to him by the end of the week, and then Hamish heads back to the Mark Lane Station. He doesn’t permit himself to glance over his shoulder even though he’d spotted the tabby still waiting for him when he’d exited the office. He tells himself it’s utterly foolish to entertain the thought of a cat following him. And, regardless, the creature won’t be permitted on the train.

When the subway car doors close, Hamish lets out a breath and then chastises himself for letting such a silly notion actually weigh on his mind. It’s a short ride to Charing Cross and an invigorating walk to the company offices just off of Pall Mall.

Not once, does Hamish look behind him.

The morning passes pleasantly enough. He responds to a sizable pile of correspondence before he realizes that lunch time has snuck up on him.

Leaving his tiny office, Hamish nods to the lobby clerk. “I’ll be back shortly.” He reaches for the front door and pulls it open. “There are several letters ready for the post on my desk—”

Suddenly, a streak of sooty grey fur dashes into the lobby, startling a squeak out of Hamish and a paper-rustling twitch out of the clerk. Leaving the door standing ajar, Hamish stumbles after the creature and pokes his head into the hall just in time to see a primly and upright poised cat tail disappear into his office!

“Oh no you don’t!” he growls, charging after the beast. Throwing the office door open wide, Hamish expects to find the cat suitably cowed and huddling under the desk or unlit stove. He does not expect the cat to be curled up on top of his desk grinning at him.

But cats do not grin, he reminds himself.

The assertion pierces his shock sufficiently and he notices precisely what the cat is lying on.
“Get off of those letters!” he hisses, stomping toward the unwanted guest.

And then the cat’s grin widens until it nearly touches each of his stubby, grey ears. His head turns – no, rotates! – once and then—

“Where is it, sir?” the lobby clerk asks, clamoring to a halt on the office threshold.

Hamish straightens, stares at the place on his desk where the cat had just been reclining contentedly. The animal is – inexplicably – gone. Disappeared. Evaporated.

Realizing that the clerk is waiting for a response, Hamish glances around and replies, “It’s not here.” Indeed, he cannot even feel its watchful gaze. “Perhaps it’s down the hall. The apprentices will take care of it.”

“I’m sure, sir,” the clerk says, gladly passing the unsavory duty onto those of less fortunate standing in the company. “Is this the correspondence you mentioned?” he asks, reaching for the stack which is considerably more askew now than it had been when Hamish had decided to go out for lunch.

“Yes.” He turns back toward the hall. Strange, watchful, disappearing cats aside, he’d very much like to get something to eat. Perhaps these visions are related to his empty stomach? If that’s the case, then the remedy will be refreshingly simple.

“Sir?” the clerk says as Hamish takes a step out the door.

He pauses and accepts the letter that the clerk hands him.

“There’s no address on this one.”

Frowning, Hamish looks over the plain envelope. How… odd. He’d addressed each and every letter himself. Or he thought he had.

“How many do you have there?” he inquires.

“Seven,” the clerk takes stock of them and replies.

Seven, which is precisely how many letters Hamish had written and envelopes he had addressed. What he holds in his hand now is some mysterious, unknown, eighth letter. With a nod, he says, “I’ll see to this one, then.” He shifts to take another step, pauses, and requests of the clerk, “I would appreciate it if you would confirm that each letter corresponds to the recipient printed on the envelope.”

“Of course, sir.”

It’s an odd request, perhaps. Certainly, it’s a task that Hamish ought to be able to manage himself but, at the moment, he doesn’t trust his own eyes.

A disappearing, smiling cat, indeed! What nonsense!

Finally escaping the office, Hamish resists looking at the letter in his possession until he has ordered a plate of stew at the small inn and tavern down the street. As he sits and waits, his fingers dip into his jacket pocket and retrieve the envelope. As it’s unsealed, it’s an easy thing to ease out the paper within. He opens it and scans the recipient and addressee’s names.

He frowns.
How very odd. The letter is made out to Alice. There is only one Alice with which Hamish is acquainted and this letter cannot be for her. He has no means of delivering it to her! And besides, he has no reason whatsoever to believe that she would be expecting a letter from a man named Tarrant Hightopp.

With a baffled shake of the head, Hamish tucks the letter – still unread, of course! – back into the envelope. Perhaps he’ll inquire at the post office. Perhaps they have a collection box for misplaced letters such as this one. If this Tarrant Hightopp person does not receive a reply from Alice in the timely manner, he would likely check with the post office and confirm its delivery, at which time they can set this fellow to rights. Yes, a perfectly *logical* course of action.

By the time his meal arrives, Hamish has already forgotten about strange, smiling, evaporating cats and is much happier for it.
Chapter 6

Alice doubts she’ll ever cease to be surprised by Underland.

The White Carriage had made its first stop at a familiar garden where the White Queen had spoken to the primroses and conversed in strange, finger waggling silence with the rocking horse flies. Only when Alice had nearly tripped over a set of overgrown miniature stairs had she noticed the small door hovering over the scummy pond at the garden’s center.

“No one’s been by to prune us in ages,” Alice had overheard an orange rose complain. Glancing over her shoulder, Alice had watched the flower fidgeting with her multitude of thorny vines.

“That is a very serious issue,” the White Queen had allowed, selecting a bishop and gesturing him forward. “We shall take care of that immediately. Herald, I believe you have an interest in horticulture, do you not?”

“I do, your Majesty.” And then the bishop had bowed deeply to the primroses and intoned, “With your permission and expertise, ladies?”

“Small snips,” the White Queen had advised, gracefully passing him a pair of gardening shears.

As the queen had tended to the pond which had been bubbling and choking on overgrowth, Alice had shared a bored look with Mallyumkun who had plopped herself down on the steps of the stairs.

“Why are we here?” Alice had muttered.

“Because the queen said ‘halt’,” Mally had snarked back half-heartedly.

With a snort, Alice had corrected herself. “No, I meant, why are we accompanying her if she doesn’t even need our assistance?”

The mouse had shrugged. “Beats me.”

This very demoralizing trend had continued in the town of Quagmoor in Queast, where Alice had followed the queen’s example and bowed to the Town Bully (a bullfrog whose deep croak could cause any and all in the vicinity to hop to obey his commands). Neither Mally nor Alice had been needed to direct the White Queen’s soldiers in repair work once the queen had given the Town Bully permission to address her army escort directly.

Alice had wandered around the marshy settlement with Mally and tried to make herself useful. Mostly she’d just gotten in people’s way. The evening before they’d been set to leave, the town had hosted a very nice banquet in honor of the queen’s visit. The White Queen had sat beside the
Bully who had croaked happily at her ladylike and queenly belch at the conclusion of the meal. Alice had been a bit too far away to hear it. Once again, she’d been keeping Mally company as they’d sat at the end of the table and out of the way.

It had been a relief to move on. After several dusty days on the road, they’d rolled into Snud’s sleepy hamlet of Snoggleton where a very lazy-looking badger with what must have been sticky droplets of honey clinging to his whiskers had greeted them warmly and then invited everyone for a noon-time nap. Just as Alice had laid her head down on the provided pillow, a clamor awakened her. Sitting up in her borrowed bed, she’d felt Mally pitter patter onto her knee for a look out the window.

“Night-dwellers,” she’d muttered on a yawn as Alice had watched the White Queen waving her arms with elegant purpose in the village square. Soldiers had trotted this way and that, hauling ladders and carrying buckets of pitch and bushels of thatch. “C’mon, Champion. Thar’s work needs doin’.”

Not that Alice had been very helpful in Snoggleton, either. In fact, she’d been so drowsy after days of poor rest and nights of dodging the thatch-mending army that she’d very nearly slept right through their passage beneath the archway of the Grampus Bluffs. If Mally hadn’t poked her with her hatpin-sized sword, Alice would have had to settle for second-hand descriptions! Which would have been a shame, indeed.

She’d gaped at the magnificent rocks and their shimmering peacock hues as they’d rolled along the dusty track.

“I shall have to re-commission the steam locomotive,” the White Queen had breezily murmured, gazing out the window at a set of overgrown tracks which disappeared into a tunnel some distance from the bluffs.

Alice had barely heard her, spellbound as she’d been by the glittering rocks and their ever-changing patterns which had immediately put her in mind of water currents and warm breezes.

Just on the other side of Grampus, the carriage had rolled to a halt yet again and this time, here in Whotchworks of Witzend, Alice had promised herself that her role would be different. She would no longer simply endure this venture as if it is another blasted engagement party!

“Well, this is a change o’ pace,” Mally declares with enthusiasm from where she’s standing on Alice’s shoulder. Behind them, sounds of nails being hammered and bricks being mason-ed create a symphony of productivity. Alice is very aware of the fact that she hadn’t been invited to participate in it.

“Hm,” Alice replies, eying the warped and rickety door in front of them. A shingle with the badly faded and peeling image of a boot painted upon it hangs on by a thread of twine next to a grimy window.

“Yer a grumpy one, eh?” the dormouse muses. “Thought yah’d be lookin’ f’ward tah this.”

“Looking forward to what, exactly?” Coaxing the town’s most cantankerous cobbler into letting the White Army fix up his shop while the White Queen and the town’s mayor – an upright-standing unicorn – make grand plans for renovation and renewal?

“At the moment, yah’re lookin’ forward at a door,” Mally informs her drolly.

Alice rolls her eyes.

“Stop bein’ such a bleedin’ ‘eart, eh? Yah’re ruinin’ all the fun.”
Alice supposes she is but, blast it, she misses the Hatter and she’s tired of being sent out and about on meaningless errands intended to keep her out of the way while the army does the actual rebuilding and repairs. Not for the first time, Alice wonders why she’d let her sense of duty override the Hatter’s very tempting plea for her to remain with him at Crims. Well, she certainly won’t be making *that* mistake twice!

Lifting a hand, she raps smartly on the door. “Mister Earwicket!” she calls.

From within she hears a muffled crash then the sound of what might be a kettle being tossed into a metal basin.

“State yer b’s’ness!” a hoarse voice shouts through the still-closed door.

“My companion and I are here on behalf of the White Queen. We should like to offer our assistance with the repair of your shop, sir.”

There’s a slight pause. Alice dares a glance at Mally who meets her gaze with just as many questions swimming in her black eyes.

And then another bang and an odd thump precede Cordwain Earwicket’s reply, “We ain’t acceptin’ charity t’day! C’m back tah-marreh!”

“It’s not charity!” Alice insists. “It’s only a few repairs, sir!”

*Thump! Clatter-clatter! Bang!*

This time, Alice doesn’t have time to glance at Mally before the shoemaker shouts, “Repairs! Why di’n yah say *so*?!”

The shop door swings-screches open and Alice resists the urge to back up a pace at the sight of the very scraggly, pot-bellied, googly-eyed hare who stands shivering on the threshold, bracing open the warped door. The White Queen had mentioned – off-handedly – that Cordwain Earwicket is Thackery’s uncle. Alice can believe it.

“Feel like a heel?” he barks.

Alice blinks at him.

“No? Tongue tied?”

“Um…” Before she can form a more coherent reply, the hare leans down and studies her Marmoreal-made, white leather boots.

“At th’ end o’ yer shoe string? Or ‘ave yah got a broken sole?”

Understanding washing through her like a salty, surf-kissed breeze from the Crimson Sea, Alice sighs and smiles. A protest dances on the tip of her tongue – closely followed by words of clarification – when Cordwain grasps her left foot by the heel and tugs.

“Up yah go, lass. Give us a look, nauw!”

Relenting – and hoping that acquiescing to his insistence on preforming *shoe* repairs will allow her to assist him with *shop* repairs – Alice obligingly shifts her weight.

Cordwain um’s and ah-ha’s over the booted foot in his hairy paws, muttering about scuffs and cheeses. When he turns his attention to the other shoe, Alice quickly sets down her left foot and
“Ar, I see th’ problem. Dreadful, right dreadful!” he insists, standing and then gesturing Alice and Mally into the shop.

Despite the ramshackle condition of the exterior of the shop, Alice is startled to discover how very well-kept the interior is. The walls of the room are clean, straight and whitewashed with well-placed shelving upon which an assortment of boots and other footwear the likes of which Alice has never seen before – each pair a different size, shape, and assortment of colors! – are lovingly displayed. Her gaze moves over the colored leather, bright stitching, and ornamental cutouts of the shoes which seem to beckon her nearer for a closer inspection.

“Inte th’ workshop, nauw!” Cordwain calls gruffly and Alice wrenches herself away from the wares, shelving her curiosity.

She steps around an assortment of benches huddled together in the center of the room and it’s apparent from the range of sizes of seats available that Cordwain Earwicket has quite a lot of experience with not only shoeing people, but Underland’s myriad of fashion-conscious creatures.

She follows him behind a service counter upon which sits a large, empty preserves jar with bits of string and whatnot tangled up within it. “Is this meant to resemble the Bluffs?” Alice asks, unwarranted, picking up the jar and turning it about. Whether or not Cordwain had intended to simulate the shifting colors of the Bluffs, that’s precisely what the swirl of colored cords, ribbons and strings puts her in mind of.

The hare cackles madly at her observation, gesturing her through a curtain and into the back of the shop. Ducking into the next room, Alice’s breath catches in her throat at the delightful chaos. Every inch of the walls is covered with shelving and hanging tools, strips of leather and various other mysterious items.

“Off wi’yer boots!” Cordwain demands.

Not taking her eyes off of the menagerie of shoemaker’s tools, Alice toes off her shoes as requested. In her stockings, she paces the length of the room and leans against a work table to get a better look at an odd collection of what appears to be worn-smooth fingers of ivory and well-oiled, carved sticks of various woods. “What are these called?” Alice asks.

Mally leaps from her shoulder onto the shelf and pokes around amongst the odd items.

“Bones ‘n’ sticks!” Cordwain trumpets, banging around at another work table. Mally wrinkles her nose at the objects and picks her way through them with as little physical contact as possible.

“Magnificent,” Alice murmurs as the sound of threads being slicked up, pulled taut and plucked fill the workshop. She takes a deep breath, smelling tanned leather, tallow, and elbow grease.

She spins around slowly, examining everything from the wooden shoe forms, rolls of leather, and assorted, wickedly sharp yet intriguingly curved cutting knives on the table to the stirrups and baskets hanging from the beams overhead. When her gaze at last comes to rest on the cobbler again, her heart nearly stops.

“Can all hares stitch so quickly?” Alice asks unthinkingly.

Cordwain ignores her, suddenly stabbing his needle through his sleeve, picking up a hammer and an iron stamp and banging away again at the top edge of her boots. As he’s clearly busy, Alice turns back to the strange knives, picking up and weighing the odd blades in her palm, one at a time. She’s just grown brave enough to dare unrolling the leathers in order to run her fingers over
the smooth, dyed surface when Cordwain sets her boots down on the table with a sound smack!

“Done!” he announces proudly.

Alice turns, looks, and gawks. These exclamation points of bright, riotous color cannot possibly have been her plain, white boots. And certainly, their transformation shouldn’t have taken only a few minutes! Rather than reach out to collect them, Alice squats down so that her eyes are level with the tabletop. She examines the stitchwork, scrolling and starbursting over the sides of the boots until it joins the lattice-work of cutout shapes near the top edge. Cordwain hadn’t left the toes of the shoes bare, despite not putting holes in them. No, here he’d carefully but deliberately scratched grooves in the leather and inked them before sealing the whole boot in some sort of clear, fragrant wax. The colors swirl and blend, creating a work of art far too fine for a mere pair of boots.

She has no words. No words whatsoever for this service he’d done her boring footwear.

“What do I owe you for these?” Alice rasps, entranced by the colorful details now swirling over the white leather.

He hiccups. “Whot yah got?”

That brings Alice up short. Certainly a few mundane repairs could not possibly be valued as highly as this craftsmanship. “Not much I’m afraid…” She casts about for something he might find useful. “I could…”

“Coul’ ain’t nuthin’,” he interrupts impatiently. “Whot can yah do?”

Thinking of her lackluster skills at sketching, painting, singing, darning, and pianoforte, Alice realizes that there’s really only one thing she has any confidence in. “Tea,” she answers. “I could prepare a nice tea for you, sir.”

Mally snorts. “You? Brew a pot o’ drinkable tea?”

“I can.” She insists, a little startled by Mally’s blatant suspicion. “The Hatter taught me how.” He had. Late one evening, as he’d sat beside her at the Crims castle kitchen table, his slightly grubby shirtsleeve brushing hers, he’d lectured her on proper tea preparation and then watched as she’d followed his instructions precisely. His reaction to his first sip – green eyes glazing and unfocusing dreamily, his eyelids drifting shut, his breath sighing out, his lips smiling gently – had assured her of her success in mastering the art.

“Harrumph!” the ever-disbelieving dormouse objects.

“Tea i’tis, then!” Cordwain crows, banging out of the workshop, gesturing them to follow him into yet another ground floor room which turns out to be a rather cluttered kitchen. Alice rescues the kettle from a wash basin and sets to work.

It’s only much later, as Alice and Mally are bedding down for the night in their borrowed bed that Mally says softly, “Tha’ was good tea, Alice.”

Recalling the dormouse’s startled squeak of pleasure upon sampling it, Alice smiles. “Thank you, Mally.”

“Tea-makin’… tha’ s a Hightopp family secret,” she explains wonderingly. “The ‘Atter don’ teach jus’ anyone ‘ow teh brew a pot, yah know.”

Alice hadn’t known that, but she does now. Smiling, Alice snuggles down into her borrowed,
Witzend pillow and – for the first time since this trip had begun – dreams of pleasant things.

*~*~*~*~*

The instant his gloved hand had grasped the door handle, he’d known it was happening again.

It. That bizarre malady he cannot seem to shake, despite all the measures he has taken. Hamish stands on the front stoop of the post office, door swinging open with unstoppable momentum, and suddenly he’s no longer on a busy street in London, he’s no longer endeavoring to return this bizarre letter to its author, he’s no longer able to convince himself that he’s sane.

The door swings open and a man with bright, orange hair and a distracted frown pulling at his horridly wild brows looks up, blinks his green eyes, smiles – revealing terribly tea-stained teeth with an unfortunate gap between the front two – and declares, “Oh! The dodo has returned!”

Hamish closes his eyes and wishes himself back to the bustling clamor of Charing Cross at lunch time. He isn’t successful.

The Hatter sighs. “Do you know it took five days, a hatpin, and a pound of butter to sort those buttons?”

Hamish opens his eyes to glare at the man but ends up following his gaze down to the floor of what appears to be a very crowded closet upon which several jars, boxes, baskets, and pouches have been overturned, their contents – a startling variety of buttons – are scattered across the floor. Incriminatingly, a large, red button sits upon the toe of Hamish’s shoe.

“It was not my intention to upset your storeroom, sir,” Hamish replies, his sense of decorum coming to his rescue in the lengthening silence.

“A rather unfortunate side-effect nonetheless,” the Hatter replies, moving aside and gesturing Hamish out of the closet with a fluttering wave of his hand. Ignoring the mess on the floor, the Hatter slams the door shut and continues, “If you’re here to speak for Alice, then let’s get it over with.”

“Speak for…? Oh, yes, I did imply that Alice is spoken for, however I am not here to speak on her behalf.”

The Hatter’s eyes narrow in thought. “Which I’m sure she would object to. Alice is not in the habit of be-halving things, unless the things to be halved are weighty and borne by her friends, in which case she rather does halve things. Very neatly. A result of being a-Pishalvered too many times, I expect.”

Hamish can think of no qualitatively meaningful response to offer at the man’s conclusion. “Perhaps,” he allows instead.

This amuses the Hatter who giggles with startling suddenness. “I would appreciate it,” he sing-songs, rocking a bit on his heels, “if you would state your business, sir. I’ve hats to customer and muffins to marzipan.”
Hamish automatically raises a hand to his jacket pocket, pressing his palm against the thrice-damned letter that he’d set out to return to the post office. “I have no business with you, sir,” he replies shortly.

“Our Hats are quite good,” he remarks, lifting one and inspecting the lining. “Well-made, even.”

“That’s the only way it’ll be well-worn,” the Hatter replies absently. “And while the compliment is appreciated, I’ll not be paying you for it, Alice’s fiancé.”

Hamish frowns at the man’s odd and deliberate enunciation of the word.

The Hatter continues, “In fact, you might try seeking employment among the courtiers as Alice is still abroad with the White Queen and cannot pay your fee.”

“My fee?” Hamish echoes, utterly discombobulated.

“Yes, yes,” the Hatter replies, pinning and stitching with frightful speed. “For speaking on her behalf,” he explains.

What Hamish burns to say is strangled into submission behind a very deliberate and level-headed “I beg your pardon?”

The Hatter lifts up the hat he is currently tending and gives it a very quick examination. “You’ll have to see the White Queen about pardons, I’m afraid, but I daresay you’ll have better luck getting one from her rather than… well, anyway. It’s lucky you stumbled into the White Queen’s castle this time rather than the former Red Queen’s garden! Although I imagine either court would have quite a lot of work for a fiancé.”

Hamish gives up on being polite. It’s time to get some answers. “What are you nattering on about? Courtiers and fees and fiancés!”

The Hatter looks up and frowns at him. “I regret to inform you, sir, that you are not minding your own business very well at all.”

“My business?”

“Of collecting a fee in exchange for speaking on someone’s behalf,” the Hatter explains with clearly thinning patience and then enunciates very deliberately, “Fee On Say.”

“Oh, good God.”

“Good dog,” the Hatter corrects him. “And although I am not a member of that noble species, I can point you in the right direction of a very fine specimen.”

This is not a daydream or a bout of madness, Hamish realizes. This is a nightmare.

He thinks of the letter in his pocket, the return of which he had been intent on completing. Well, clearly, that’s not going to happen here. He wonders if there’s any use at all in correcting the Hatter’s misconception with regards to the role of a fiancé… Likely not. In addition, it’ll only further delay his return to London.
“How do I depart this place, sir?” Hamish asks abruptly, resenting the fact that he must ask for directions from this figment of his surprisingly colorful imagination.

The Hatter, his attention still trained upon the creation in his right hand, waves distractedly toward the far wall with his left. “The front door should suffice.”

“It had better,” Hamish growls, stalking toward it. He’s momentarily tempted to give his surroundings one more appraisal, but no. No, he will not entertain this madness. Suffering it is quite enough as it is!

His gloved hand grasps the door handle and, as he pulls it open, a very familiar cacophony of sound rushes into his ears. His heart leaps into his throat, choking him on hope and—

Yes! He is in London again! As Hamish pauses, still holding the door open, he takes stock of his surroundings. The busy street, the coal stains, the black carriages, the scent of horses and industry and fried onions, the solid masonry of the building in front of him and the lamp lit offices he can see within…!

London. Again. He is precisely where he’d been when he’d suddenly found himself in that wretched closet in that nonsensical Underplace.

He sighs, straightens his shoulders and takes a step toward the threshold.

Splat!

Hamish startles, leaping back as something very wet and heavy smacks onto the top of his hat from above. Whipping it off, he makes an affronted noise at the sight of rotted rain gutter filth splattered across the brown beaver pelt.

“Disgusting!” he declares, trying not to gag at the stench of it. Well, he can’t very well conduct the business he’d planned at the post office now! Now he’ll have to see about having this set to rights immediately!

And then movement above his head draws his gaze and Hamish watches, eyes narrowed as a grey tabby cat winks one bright green eye at him before trotting along the second story ledge of the building and disappearing around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

“Cordwain” is a term used to refer to a specific type of leather that some European shoemakers used. In some cases, “cordwain” actually meant “a shoemaker”.

Soft shoe leather that’s easy to work with is said to be “cheesey”.

“Bones and sticks” are a selection of bone and/or wooden burnishing tools, used for smoothing out rough edges and tucking in corners and such along the seams in a leather shoe.
in which Alice has something to say and Hamish has something to hide

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7

The thing Alice likes best about her newly improved shoes (at which the White Queen had raised her very dark and perfectly groomed brows) is how very much they remind her of the colorful workmanship of the Hatter’s top hat. Besides which, each passing day is a step in his direction. She fancies that, with these boots on her feet, she is fated to be with him again soon.

With this revelation comes a sense of peace (but also trembling excitement) which drives her to make the most of her days. She chats with the baker of Whotchworks, assists an elderly goose with weeding her garden, and pays several visits to Cordwain. Before he inevitably orders her to make him a pot of tea, he permits her to poke around in his workshop. Sometimes she even helps him a bit.

“Finger ‘n’ hand me them nippers, Alishin,” he grunts, glaring bug-eyed at the leather stretched over the wooden shoe form.

She does, sighing. She shakes her head in amused tolerance as he begins tugging at the boot-in-making. Alice has lost track of the number of times she has politely informed him of her name. He seems determined to mispronounce it.

“Yah’ll b’back tah-marreh, aye, Alishin?” he grunts without looking up from the shoe he’s currently jerking and yerking from inside-out to inside-in-and-outside-out.

“No, sir, I’m afraid I won’t. We’re heading back to Marmoreal tomorrow.”

“Uh-hum. Tah-marreh,” he grumbles distractedly.

Although she suspects he hadn’t really heard what she’d said, Alice lets him be. She doesn’t doubt that she’ll see him again, perhaps for more shoe repairs once she’s worn through the soles of these. Because of this, she isn’t disappointed when Cordwain does not join the crowd in the village the next morning to wish them fairfarren. After much fanfare, Alice is once again ensconced in the carriage with the queen and Mally, bouncing gracefully down the road to the White Queen’s Castle.

“What do you think of a champion’s role now, dear Alice?” the queen inquires kindly as they enter Tulgey Wood.

Alice blinks, startled. “Is that why…?”

The queen answers her question before she can sort out the words she’ll need to complete it. “I would have no objection were you to follow your interests in other directions. I was hoping this little trip would aid you in identifying the things nearest and dearest to your heart.”
Alice grins, thinking of the Hatter. “Yes, it has. Although…” She frowns down at her white uniform and the sword at her side. “If I were to resign from being your champion, what would I do at Marmoreal?”

“Ohh,” the queen replies with a nod. “Yes, we shall have to think on that.”

Still, it seems like a small detail and utterly unimportant when compared with the man (and marzipan muffins) waiting for her in Marmoreal. She has time to do something useful with her life. So long as the Hatter stands with her, she can face anything. Smiling, she looks out the window and takes a deep breath as her heart swells with anticipation and excitement and readiness. Alice sighs happily as she realizes that she does feel ready. Ready for the future. Ready for him.

“I’m going to tell the Hatter,” Alice murmurs to Mally sometime later as the White Queen dozes against the carriage’s comfortable cushions.

“Tell ‘im…?” Mally prompts, although Alice can see from her expression that she already suspects. Perhaps this is merely a test to see if she is really Alice enough – if she has enough Muchness – to say it aloud.

She does. “I love him.”

Mally pats her arm and nods with friendly encouragement. “I’ve got yer back, Alice. Ain’t no one interruptin’ yah wi’ me standin’ watch a’th’door!”

They make brief stops at several farm houses along the way. Sometimes the White Guard helps with whatever needs doing and sometimes they merely visit with the owners. Alice talks to a very familiar hedgehog who, squeaking happily, introduces her to its mate and three little ones.

Little ones. Yes, they are a possibility if the Hatter shares her feelings. She’s still not sure if she’s completely ready for that, but the vision of him with three little ones – perhaps a little boy clinging to his papa’s knee and a little girl with her arms wrapped around his neck, blowing raspberries against his cheek, and the Hatter himself smile-giggle-snorting at a toddler with her papa’s top hat drooping down around her ears as she grabs for his bandaged fingers with sticky hands…

It is only a vision, but it steals her breath away. Her heart thumps painfully in her chest. For the first time in her life, she wants that. She wants him and their children and laughter and the sound of small, running feet. The dream of it is so new it is painful.

Luckily, the bouncing of the carriage seems to loosen up the tight knot that her heart had become. Little by little, it becomes easier to breathe, to smile, to imagine herself saying, “I love you, Hatter.” The fantasy ends there as she can’t bring herself to picture his reply although she glimpses the hint of a delighted smile before she plays the scene over again and again.

When they crest the final hill before Marmoreal Castle, Alice feels her mouth go dry and her heart race and her hands chill. She is – undeniably – a nervous wreck.

Is this why men rarely propose to ladies they love? Is this why so few love matches are made? This terrible anticipation and unbearable fear? Dear flora and fauna of Underland but it will destroy her if he doesn’t return her affection. But no, no that won’t happen. She recalls his smiles which have always been warm when aimed at her and she recalls the way his hand had gripped hers that night in the graveyard and how very happy he’d been when she had chosen to stay in Underland… with him.

When the carriage rolls to a stop, Alice has to clutch the seat cushions to keep from climbing over
the queen, reaching through the window to open the carriage door herself and race up to the Hatter and….!

The door opens. Alice’s feet jiggle impatiently. Mally climbs up to her shoulder and gets a good grip on Alice’s tunic. The queen gracefully descends. When the monkey footman pokes his head into the carriage next, Alice nearly bowls the poor thing over in her rush to disembark. She stumbles onto the white drive and glances about, noting the crowd of courtiers whom the queen is serenely addressing. She looks past them as she tries not to run down the drive, searching for a Hatter-shaped riot of color, but she sees no such figure.

“Well, perhaps he’s in the middle of a hat,” she muses, not slowing her loping steps as she mounts the stairs and enters the castle. Her scabbard still clinks at her side, banging against the back of her thigh with every running step. She ignores it.

“Excuse me,” she says to a squirrel who is dusting one of the marble busts in the grand gallery. “Where can I find the Hatter’s workshop?”

The creature chirps and points down one of the many halls branching off from the room.

“Thank you!” Alice calls over her shoulder, already trotting in that direction.

The hallway seems to stretch longer and longer with every step she takes. Pulse thrumming and breaths whistling, Alice follows the sound of bobbins being selected, the clatter of a sewing machine, the soft thump of a hat stand being moved…

And then she is there. The door before her is closed, but the placard clearly labels the room beyond as the Hat Shop in fine, scrolling calligraphy. Alice takes a deep breath and glances at Mally who gives her an encouraging pat on the cheek.

“Go get ‘im, Alice,” the dormouse whispers.

Alice offers a shaking, clammy palm to Mally and carefully sets her down on the floor in the hall. She then straightens and raps softly on the door. She waits a moment, but when no shout of protest is made, Alice eases the door open and peers inside.

“Hatter?” she queries and then, locating him at the far worktable, lets herself into the room. “I’m back! I mean, we’re back, but as there’s just me here now… um…”

He glances up from his work, giving her a happy grin. “Yes, yes, I can see you are here, Alice,” he lisps, his hands still working with breathtaking speed on a white cap. “And earlier than I anticipated!” He turns his attention back to the creation in his hands, frowning slightly with some Hatter-ish thought.

Alice feels suddenly unsure now as she approaches him. She’d expected a warmer greeting. Perhaps some enthusiastic gestures and, well, a completely and utterly improper embrace would have been nice… but that had clearly been too much to hope for. Still, he’d seemed happy enough to see her. Summoning a smile, Alice says, “I seem to have inconvenienced you.”

“Oh, no inconvenience,” he replies then tilts his head to the side as if listening to something in the distance.

Ping!

A delicate, silver chime sounds and the Hatter puts down the cap with a smile. “Now you are on time,” he tells her, striding from the work area to the room’s modest hearth. There he removes a gleaming kettle from the fire – Alice can only assume that Marmoreal kettles are not so crass as to
whistle when they boil – and sees to the porcelain teapot.

Although he had not invited her to, Alice wanders over to the table which has been set for two and studies the Hatter as he steeps the tea leaves, lifts the silver lid on a tray of edibles – tiny muffins, marzipan by the smell of them – and then pulls out a chair.

“Would you care to sit down?”

She nods dumbly and tries not to bang her knees against the table legs as he pushes her seat in for her.

“There, now, tell me all about your journey, Alice!” he invites. “Your boots appear to have had a very colorful adventure.”

Alice grins. “Yes! I met the most wonderful cobbler named—”

“Cordwain?” the Hatter supplies, grinning as he pours the tea. “Thackery’s uncle is a very colorful shoemaker.”

“Yes! Have you met him?”

“Once upon a market day, I believe,” he replies, passing her a cup of perfectly Hightopp-brewed tea. Their fingers brush inadvertently during the exchange.

Slightly flustered from the brief touch of warm, rough skin and frayed bandages, she clears her throat and searches for something – anything! – to say next. “Did – did you know that Herald, one of the queen’s bishops, is partial to—?”

“Horticulture?”

His playful tone slays her sudden case of nerves. Alice harrumphs through her grin. If it’s a game he wants… “And Quagmoor’s Town Bully is a—”

“Bull frog?”

“And the queen actually—”

“Belched at dinner?”

Alice sits back with a huff. “Are you going to tell my adventures or shall I?”

He giggles. “So sorry, Alice. By all means, please continue.”

“Well, here’s something you may not know.” She bullies forward before her trembling hands and fluttering stomach can somehow conspire together to tie up her tongue. “I’m in love with you.”

For a moment, the words seem to stop time itself. Alice holds her breath. The Hatter’s grin freezes on his face. And then he twirls his fingers, shaking back his lace cuffs and says, “Alice, have you received any correspondence recently?”

Still holding her breath, waiting for his reaction, she somehow manages to comprehend his non sequitur and then shakes her head.

“Ah. I see. Sugar cube?”

Alice stares at him as he passes the dish.
He waits for a moment, but when Alice makes no move toward it, he replaces it on the table. “Perhaps not with the first cup, then.”

She watches as he plucks up one for himself and drops it in his tea.

“Hatter…” she whispers carefully, wary of making too loud a noise and awakening the heartache she can feel just there lurking in the pit of her stomach, waiting to roar up and swallow her heart.

“Did you know your fiancé was here the other day?” the Hatter remarks as if changing the topic of conversation from the recent string of sunny days to another equally mundane matter. “Crashed right through the closet and spilled the buttons.”

“He’s not my fiancé,” Alice objects, daring to hope that this is all some sort of misunderstanding. Hoping that once this issue is cleared up, the Hatter will—

He nods. “Yes, yes, I’d thought so! He was far too officious and concerned with his own self-importance to speak for you. I’m glad you’ve let him go. Now, if you should require another fiancé,” the Hatter continues, pronouncing the word strangely, as if it is three words of equal importance instead of one word with three syllables. Alice disregards his irregular enunciation. Her heart is suddenly in her throat and it’s making it very difficult for her to breathe and could he possibly be saying what she hopes to hear? The wait is only momentary, but it is the longest moment of her life, she’s sure! And then she hears: “I would suggest asking Nivens for a recommendation.”

For a moment, she simply cannot sort out his words, cannot make sense of them. “What? Nivens?” And then Alice hears herself blurt out, “Why not you?”

The Hatter blinks at her, looking thoroughly and unflatteringly startled. “Oh, no, I’m afraid I can’t recommend anyone in good faith. Nivens on the other hand—”

Alice forces herself to focus on his words and permits herself to say the first thing that comes to mind. These are the only things keeping her from falling apart as it becomes increasingly obvious that— “No, why can’t you be my fiancé?”

Alice decides she will die of shame later. She cannot seem to stop the momentum of this conversation and she’s not sure she wants to. Certainly, when it comes to a halt it will be a train wreck unlike any that have ever occurred in Underland before.

“Alice, please. I am a hatter. And you are fully capable of speaking for yourself, so I must confess it rather puzzles me that you would be willing to pay for such a service from that Fee On Say.”

Finally, Alice understands. The relief is glorious… until she realizes that the Hatter’s misunderstanding of the concept of a fiancé doesn’t help her navigate this strange moment. With all their words twisting up and turning her around, Alice reluctantly decides that there’s probably only one way to be perfectly clear on how she feels for him and desperately hopes he feels for her.

She stands, her chair legs scooting back with a hiccup-y screech. The Hatter’s brows rise in surprise as she steps around the table. She braces herself on its linen-covered surface with one hand and supports herself against his jacketed shoulder with the other. Before her gathered Muchness can scatter, Alice leans in and presses her lips to his. Deliberately this time.

He doesn’t move away, which is somewhat encouraging. Slowly, moving one hand at a time, she frames his face with her palms as she brushes her lips against his. Alice does not know much about kissing, but she knows that the longer this moment lasts, the more she can put off the
aftermath of it, which she is beginning to suspect she will not care for.

Her fingers curl a little, holding him tightly in place, and she begs him in silence to kiss her back.

He doesn’t.

When she cannot bear his inaction any longer, she steps back and forces her hands to drop to her sides. Silence, despite not being invited to tea, stretches and yawns between them.

Alice feels no inclination whatsoever to speak. Her mind is blank with dawning horror.

The Hatter glances toward the fire and then at the table. When his gaze alights on Alice’s table setting, he declares with forced cheer, “You haven’t drunk your tea yet, Alice.” And then, reaching for the pastry tray, offers, “Muffin?”

Alice shakes her head. “I just kissed you.”

The Hatter’s grin stretches wider, as if she has committed some grave social gaffe. Something worse than kissing him in the first place. “And I’m rather trying to politely ignore it,” he responds, sitting perfectly still. His hands do not fidget. His brows do not twitch. His lips do not smile.

The world seems to simply stop.

She gasps out, “But you… care for me and I for you and…”

“And while I’m not heartless,” he gently interjects, his expression saddening, “I’m terribly afraid that what you wish of me simply isn’t… Rather, I do not…”

“I stayed,” she mouths, heat blossoming in her face and threatening to incinerate her. “You asked me to stay…”

“All of the world seems to simply stop.

Perhaps his tone is kind. Perhaps his look is warm. Alice doesn’t hear or see it. Nodding, she turns on her heel and flees the room. Although he does not think as much of her as she’d hoped, she will not lose whatever regard he may still miraculously hold for her by letting him see her cry.

*~*~*~*~*

“Hamish, it’s so good of you to come. Please, sit down.”

Around the knot in his throat, Hamish coughs out, “Thank you, Madam Kingsleigh.”

“Tea?”

He nods and tries not to stare at his hostess who had so kindly and readily received him. He feels his conscience sting from shame. Ever since Alice’s inexplicable disappearance and Hamish’s
visit with her in that impossible realm with its talking beasts and automatons, it has become increasingly difficult for him to avoid the very real fact that Alice had left people behind here in London. People who, presumably, have not been given the opportunity to visit with Alice as he has. His most recent foray into that odd world had pushed him down this street and up the steps of the Kingsleigh residence. He owes it to Helen Kingsleigh to try to ease her mind if at all possible.

According to Hamish’s mother, Madam Kingsleigh has been making excuses for Alice for the last three fortnights, but he can only imagine the strain she must be under, how concerned she must be for her daughter’s safety and wellbeing. Hamish briefly toys with the idea of sharing his inexplicable experiences with her, but no. No, nothing good would come from sharing those… episodes. However, he had been standing right next to the woman when Alice had disappeared. She does not have to pretend with him. Surely that amounts to something.

“How are you, Madam?” he asks, accepting the cup of earl grey with lemon.

She glances toward the window and squints into the weak sunlight which filters into the room through the lace draperies. “As well as can be expected considering…”

When her voice trails off, Hamish wrestles for something comforting to say, but he dithers too long.

Drawing a deep breath, Helen Kingsleigh asks, “Did she really…? There in the hall, did Alice really…?”

Hamish winces as the woman’s voice breaks in the midst of uttering Alice’s name. He nods woefully. “Yes, she disappeared right before our eyes.”

“I still can’t believe it. Every morning, I go to her room expecting to see her talking to her reflection in the looking glass or writing in her diary or humming some oddment of tune but there’s… no one. Only silence.”

“It’s enough to drive one mad,” Hamish hears himself contribute.

Helen blinks at him, her expression shuttering. “Do you think I am?”

“Please do not take offense, Madam Kingsleigh. I meant only—”

“No, no, it’s all right. Charles would have encouraged it, I think. Madness.” Regarding the place setting, she remarks, “It’s a pity he’s not here to see it.”

Neither is Alice, Hamish thinks and presses his lips together tightly so that he does not inadvertently speak it.

“How is it I’ve lost half of my family in so short a time?” she whispers softly.

Unsure if she’d meant for him to hear, Hamish elects to take a noisy sip of tea.

“I’ve hired a runner from Bow Street,” she informs him, a steely note in her tone.

Hamish blinks. “What did you tell him about the nature of her disappearance?”

“What I thought he would believe: my fanciful and rebellious daughter has perhaps played an elaborate trick on us all, an illusion. He’s looking into establishments which hire magicians and other such entertainers. Perhaps they’ve seen a girl who looks like…”
“A very sound idea. I suppose it’s too soon to hear definitively one way or the other?”

Something in his tone must have reached through Helen’s grief and confusion. She looks up suddenly, her gaze moving over him appraisingly. “Perhaps… I’m not the only one concerned about Alice, Hamish?”

Setting down his cup, he rubs a hand over his face and slouches unforgivably in his chair. “Sometimes,” he whispers, horrified that he’s truly admitting to this, “I think I see her, hear her. Her presence is so strong and I…”

Helen sniffs tellingly, while reaching discretely for her handkerchief. “I know. She seems just around the corner.”

“Oh on the other side of the looking glass,” he mutters, weary to the bone from all the strangeness and uncertainty.

“Yes. Sometimes I think I see her looking back at me.”

“We shall find answers, Madam,” Hamish swears rashly.

Helen nods, her throat working and eyes glistening. “Yes, we… Yes, I believe—” Hamish flinches when her voice cracks, halving the word. With a flutter of fabric, she clumsily retrieves her napkin from her lap and nearly upsets the tea service in her haste to gain her feet. “Please excuse me for a moment, Hamish,” she whispers in a rush.

He stands as she strides from the room, her handkerchief already being pressed alternately to one eye and then the other. He thinks he hears a single sniffle and the sound of it wrenches open a wound in his conscience. He should not have spoken so rashly. Perhaps he should not have come here at all. In fact, he—

Sniff-sniff…

Hamish frowns and glances at the doorway as a set of sniffles invade the room. No one is crying in the doorway, however. And when he steps forward to investigate the hall, he finds that, too, is empty. Puzzled, he turns back to the room and follows the sound of someone sobbing softly until he is standing beside a wardrobe. Both doors are closed and he tells himself that they ought to remain so. Why, if this is another one of his wholly inappropriate episodes he doesn’t want to encourage it!

“Alice?” a small, soft voice says.


“Aye. I’m so sorry, Alice. We both thought…”

“We?” Alice prompts, alarm entering her tone.

“Th’ queen an’ I,” her companion says. “We coul’ both see tha’ th’Atter was fond o’ yah. An’ we ‘oped he woul’…”

Alice’s bubble of laughter is cruel and it makes Hamish flinch. “Love me back?” she supplies with such mockery in her tone that Hamish wishes the Hatter were standing before him this very instant so he could kill that bloody mad orange rotter with his bare hands!

“I’m so sorry, Alice,” her companion repeats, clearly at a loss for words.
“So am I, Mally. So am I.”

Alice’s companion – Mally – sighs expressively. “Wha’ll yah do now?”

There’s a long, hushed moment. Hamish recognizes it. Once or twice, he’d come upon a thoughtful Alice and the silence had sounded precisely like this.

“Repairs,” she says softly but with a thread of determination in her voice. “I’ve a cobbler to see about a broken sole.”

Her words are utterly mad and nonsensical, but Hamish can’t help but ache at the pain in her voice. He reaches for the latch on the wardrobe door, wondering if he dares open it and climb inside so that he might join Alice wherever she is and—

And what? Offer her a handkerchief? His shoulder?

He pauses, considering that.

Yes, he decides. He would like to offer her that much. They are friends after all.

He grips the wardrobe latch with purpose, his expression drawing into a frown of determination and then—

The sound of footsteps in the hallway makes him jump. He drops his hand as if the metal handle on the door had burned him. A mere moment later, his hostess reenters the room.

“I’m terribly sorry for that display, Hamish,” Madam Kingsleigh says, meeting his gaze with dry—if slightly reddened—eyes.

Hamish straightens away from the wardrobe and hastens to the table to hold out her chair for her, his mind racing and chest aching in response to what he’d heard. Or rather, in response to what he believes he’d heard. Perhaps it is a kindness, then, that Alice’s mother has not been given these glimpses into her daughter’s new life. It goes without saying that he must not mention these things he sees and hears to her. She would think him mad—which, perhaps, he is—and accuse him of being vicious and cruel, preying upon her uncertainties in such a way.

Yes, it is best to keep what he thinks he may know of Alice’s whereabouts and wellbeing a secret. Besides which, he cannot imagine Mrs. Kingsleigh welcoming the news that her daughter’s affections had just been spurred by a mad hatter.

As Hamish retakes his seat with forced composure, Helen offers him more tea which he declines.

She takes a sip from her own cup and then, squaring her shoulders, begins their visit anew.

“Now, Hamish. I’ve heard from your mother that you’ve taken a very active interest in the trading company. I believe she mentioned an excursion to China?”

Hamish nods. The reminder of Alice’s legacy and her heartache makes his own heart twist—wringing itself—within his chest. “But the implementation of that enterprise may be some time off in the future yet,” he replies.

As Helen seems to relax—no doubt glad of his continued presence in town, glad that there is one other person with whom she can confide—Hamish tries not to think of the arrangements he’d made at the wharf offices which had been confirmed with the delivery of yesterday’s post. He’ll be aboard and the venture will be underway by the end of the month.

Clearing his throat, he puts forth his best effort at a smile and insipid teatime conversation,
“Mother’s birthday will be upon me soon and I’ve no notion of what would please her. Any advice you could offer on the subject would be most welcome, Madam Kingsleigh.”

Chapter End Notes

“Alishin” is a shoemaking term (of Scottish origin, I believe). It’s one of the many names for an awl.

“Jerk and yerk” describes the act of peeling the sewn leather off of the shoe mold (or “last”) and turning it right side out (so that the sole can be added).
Chapter 8

It isn’t raining when Alice arrives, feet aching and boots dusty, at a very familiar door. She’d walked for days to get here, had slept in barns and brewed tea the Hightopp way in exchange for meals at the very same farm houses she had just visited with the White Queen’s entourage. No one had asked why she and Mally had returned, had been traveling back the way they’d come so recently. It seems that one look at Alice had somehow supplied the answer. She idly wonders if perhaps she wears her heart on her sleeve?

It isn’t raining when Alice once more faces the warped door and battered sign of Cordwain Earwicket’s shop. In fact, the sun is shining warmly and Alice is very sweaty and thirsty. It isn’t pouring; there is no steady pitter patter of raindrops on the road; no drizzle soaks her and chills her down to the bone, but it feels as if there ought to be. For the first time, Alice misses her homeland and its drearily predictable weather patterns.

“All Alice…” Mally whispers in question, in warning, in support. “It’s not too late teh turn back, be a champion f’r th’ queen.”

Alice shakes her head. They’ve already had this discussion and her feelings have not changed in the interim. Even before the Hatter had refused her, she had lost all interest in being the queen’s champion. There’s nothing for her at Marmoreal except the life of a courtier or a servant. Neither holds much appeal.

Alice glances down at her boots, smiles despite the burning of her tender eyes which have been scalded by days’ worth of hot tears, and says softly, resolutely, “I make the path.”

And then she knocks upon the door.

At the sound of a kettle being tossed into a metal basin, her grin widens until her lips wobble so tremendously that she has to bite her lower lip to keep them under control and smile-shaped. There are thumps and clatters and bangs and then finally she hears the voice she’d been waiting for.

“State yer b’s’ness!”

Alice briefly closes her eyes, assures herself of her choice, and announces, “Shoemaking!”

“We ain’t acceptin’ apprentices t’day! C’m back tah-marreh!”

Despite the rebuff, Alice doesn’t turn away from the door. She fists her hands and shouts back, “Are you accepting Alices today?”

There’s a pause, which she hopes is thoughtful, and then a series of thumps which could only be irregular March hare footsteps. They grow louder and louder as they move closer and closer to the warped door.
The portal creaks open and Cordwain peeps at her with a one-squinted-eye and a one-bug-eyed stare. She watches and waits as he looks her up and down. Perhaps he senses what the others had at each homestead she’d imposed upon for a place to rest and a meal on her way back to Whotchworks. His ears droop a bit. His whiskers stop twitching. Quietly, he steps back, opening the door for her and Mally to enter.

“Aye,” he says quietly. “We’re acceptin’ Alishins. E’en late-ish ones.”

Too thankful for words, Alice enters the shop. She heads for the kitchen and the teapot, expecting Cordwain to demand tea before anything else, but he surprises her by grabbing her wrist and pulling her in the direction of the workshop where he sits her down on the bench. He stomp-hops into the kitchen and, a moment later reappears with the water pail and ladle. Alice offers some to Mally before soothing her own parched throat as Cordwain organizes his tools. When he seems satisfied with the selection in his paws, he spins around with an air of determination.

No doubt sensing that work is about to be done, Mally skitters off of Alice’s shoulder and watches in silence as the shoemaker bends over and examines Alice’s road-worn boots.

“Ye’ve made a righ’mess, lass,” he grumbles, tapping the dusty toes with a long-handled brush. He looks up, twitches, blinks, and then stares at her. “I’m goin’ teh show ye hauw teh clean i’tup.”

She nods and lifts her feet, one at a time, so that the old hare can pull her boots off of her raw, blistered, and sparingly bandaged feet. Staring blankly ahead, she senses Cordwain moving about the workshop, gathering up this and banging around that until finally, he presses a cloth into her right hand and a boot into the other. He then plops down beside her on the bench and begins slowly buffing away the road stains on the second boot. For a moment, Alice merely watches him in silence, and then she takes a deep breath and mimics the motions of his paws the best she can. Sometimes he pauses and twitches a finger, correcting Alice’s grip on the rag and boot by example. He says nothing. She listens to his speedy, rabbit-y breaths and the gentle but irregular plopping of salty drops upon the leather in her hands.

“We’ll have tha’ tea tah-marreh,” Cordwain says after the boots have been cleaned and Mally is snoring on a soft-looking and recently-laundered rag. “An’ then we’ll mend these grinnin’ seams.”

Alice nods and allows him to push and shove her up the wooden ladder to the unfinished second floor of the house-and-shop. He directs her behind a series of sheet curtains he’d strung up down the middle of the attic room with twine and Alice stares blankly at a very, very large trunk. Its lid is open and, peering into it, she sees several neatly folded tunics and trousers and even some underthings. There’s a hair brush and a hand mirror, a journal, ink pot and pen. There’s also a teacup, wooden bowl, and spoon.

She watches in silence as Cordwain bends down and grasping the large, iron handle at the bottom of the massive trunk, pulls out a drawer which contains a trundle bed of more than sufficient size to accommodate her.

“Won’t pay ye a wage, mind,” the hare tells her. “Don’t see much coin ‘ere sae far from th’ castles.”

“I want to make shoes, not money,” Alice replies.

“Then tha’s whot ye’ll do.”

Cordwain stomps off to his side of the attic room. Alice, her gaze still blearily trained on the
welcoming pallet and its warm quilt, whispers a quiet “Thank you” that the shoemaker doesn’t acknowledge with more than a twitch of his ears.

She pulls off her dirty clothes, pulls on a clean shrift, and crawls into bed. Later, there will be questions, she is sure, although of what variety she cannot say and she is far too exhausted to even imagine them. She closes her eyes and plummets into sleep.

And then, only a short time later, opens them in response to a loud bark of “Alishin!”

“What?!” she demands, sitting up in bed and clutching the quilt. Heart racing, she glances around but the room is completely dark. The only source of light appears to be a single candle which the shoemaker holds on the other side of the sheet-wall.

“‘Tis tah-marreh!” Cordwain announces.

She blinks.

“Why d’ye wan’tae make shoes?” he questions rudely.

She replies just as bluntly, “Because I make the path and I need shoes to walk it. Everyone does. Need shoes to walk their own path, I mean.”

Her mind is still far too muzzy despite the abrupt awakening so she can only guess that she’s making sense. Mostly. Probably. Maybe.

After a long moment, Cordwain sniffs. “Ar, then le’s ge’tae work, _apprentice_.”

Glancing around and assuring herself that, yes, it’s pitch dark in the attic, Alice protests, “But it’s the middle of the night.”

“An’ th’ custom’s a-sleepin’!” he retorts.

“Right,” she exhales on a wry grin. That makes perfect sense.

“Workshop! Nauw!” And then he sets the candle down on the floor and thump-hop-bumps his way downstairs.

With a resigned sigh, Alice throws back the quilt and fumbles blindly with the clothing in the trunk. She moves so quickly that she has dressed, collected the candle, and descended the stairs before her tears have had a chance to catch up with her. She leaves them there, beside the trundle bed trunk, for later and gets to work.

Thunder rolls over London moments before the torrent is unleashed. Hamish glares at the street beyond the window of the coach, frowning mightily. Of course, now that they’ve nearly reached the wharf at which the Wonder has been docked and is awaiting his pre-voyage inspection, the
heavens have opened.

“Marvelous timing, London old girl,” Hamish mutters, thoroughly disgusted. Well, there’s nothing to be done for it. The traffic in town has nearly made him late and Hamish abhors tardiness. With an oft-put-upon sigh, he turns up his collar, pulls on his gloves and dons his recently cleaned hat. Thusly attired, he then reaches for the carriage door.

He descends the steps onto the muddy street, taking care to pick his way through the mire to avoid the complete and utter ruin of his shoes. With his eyes downcast and squinting in the gloomy twilight of the autumn evening, Hamish takes quite a few steps before he becomes impatient. Surely, he should have reached the walkway by now!

Glancing up, Hamish’s shoulders droop and yet another sigh escapes him.

It is raining, yes. In fact, it’s absolutely pouring. He is not, however where he ought to be.

“This has gone well and truly beyond ridiculous,” Hamish remarks to the empty and very muddy village square before him.

His surroundings do not deign to answer.

“Lovely. Simply smashing,” he mutters, huddling into his collar a bit more and glancing about for any signs of life or activity. Nearly every window is dark despite the lateness of the hour. Clearly, his arrival this time is well past nightfall. There is only one invitingly warm light glowing in the immediate vicinity and it appears to be coming from the most unreliable-looking structure in the entire settlement.

Slogging through the mud, Hamish wonders if he’ll have to suffer that mad hatter’s hospitality. Or perhaps that talking rabbit’s? He imagines all sorts of odd and nonsensical hosts, every remotely possible scenario except for the one he glimpses through the small, unwashed window. Lifting his gloved hands, he scrubs a bit at the dust-smeared and be-cobwebbed pane, the leather squeaking against the glass and… Yes!

The young woman he’d just startled out of her work is none other than – but it simply cannot be! – the very person who ought to have no business whatsoever in a cramped and cluttered workshop. Astoundingly, the woman is—

“What are you doing here?” he hears himself exclaim softly.
Alice chuckles as she takes his coat from him and spreads the garment out to dry. “It should be me who asks that question, I think.”

“That may be and my reply would be the same as it was last time: I haven’t the slightest notion as to why, in the process of disembarking from a carriage, I should find myself in the middle of this little, er…”

“Hamlet?” Alice supplies diplomatically.

Hamish snorts with amused concurrence.

“I should think,” Alice continues, “that the storm would have startled you far more than a trip to Underland at this point. This is your second visit, isn’t it?”

She has a point about him knowing better than to be startled by another instance of instantaneous travel even if she is incorrect on the number of times that he’s found himself stepping out of London and into this place. He’s more resigned to them now than anything else. “Unfortunately, our lovely city of London is enduring similar inclement weather,” he replies, seating himself upon the bench that Alice drags closer to the hearth.

She sits down beside him and hums. “Ah yes. Lovely London weather.”

For a moment, Hamish merely studies Alice as she smiles into the fire. Warming his hands, his self-centered disgruntlement at finding himself once more at the mercy of his (or would this be Alice’s?) madness recedes and he recalls the last time he’d heard Alice’s voice. He frowns and, turning his gaze toward the fire, remarks, “I must confess: the biggest shock upon my arrival here is seeing you—” He glances at his surroundings and deduces the specific trade practiced in this room from the collection of tools and wooden foot-shaped molds. “—in a shoemaker’s workshop.”

Alice sighs. “It’s a rather long story.”

“I’m sure. And you needn’t tell me why you’ve parted company with that, er, fellow – I’m afraid I overheard a bit of your conversation with someone by the name of Mally—”

Rudely, Alice demands, “How in the world did you hear… hear…?!?”

Seeing the betrayed expression form on her face and the sheen of tears gathering in her eyes, Hamish hastens to explain, “I cannot fathom how. One moment, I was taking tea with your mother who had to momentarily excuse herself and then the next I could hear the sound of your voice coming from within the parlor wardrobe.”

“You heard the sound of my voice?”

“Er… yes. And this Mally person’s as well. I inferred that you had… confessed something of a rather delicate nature to a certain… individual and he did not… receive it well.”

Alice nods, tears glistening on her lashes. “You heard us through the wardrobe?”

Feeling like an utter fool for confessing to such a thing, Hamish mutters, “It would seem so.”

“Hm, I’ve always had a suspicion about that particular armoire.”

Hamish rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“I would introduce you to Mally, but she’s asleep upstairs. As is the shoemaker.”
“And you are not resting because…?”

Alice sighs heavily. “Would you believe me if I said Mally and Cordwain snore terribly?”

Hamish gives her a speculatively haughty look. “Would either this Mally or shoemaker be a talking rabbit, by chance?”

“I’m afraid not. A dormouse and a March hare, respectively.”

“Marvelous.”

Alice giggles at his droll tone.

In the silence that follows, Hamish finds himself staring at a boot in mid-mend on the neighboring table. He dimly realizes that Alice must have been working on it when he’d arrived. Which reminds him of another point he’d like to have clarified: “What in the world would make you turn to shoe repair as a worthwhile endeavor?”

He sees a smile curve her lips in the moment before she glances away to dash aside her tears with shaking hands. “You find my being a shoemaker’s apprentice upsetting, Hamish?”

“Of course! Whatever could possibly prompt you to come here and—” Hamish glances at her stained, callused, and scraped hands and shudders eloquently. “—make shoes like some common tradesman?”

“It’s not common,” Alice retorts softly but firmly. “Not at all. If there’s anything I’ve learned in the last two weeks it’s this: the making of shoes is a fine art. Each pair empowers the wearer to not only set foot upon their path, but to walk it.” She glances down at Hamish’s feet and grins widely. “I believe these could do with a bit of color…”

Hamish balks, “Under no circumstances will I permit you to lay a finger on my shoes, Miss Kingsleigh.”

Her sigh is mockingly melancholy. “In retaliation, I should forbid you from overhearing my conversations in the future, although in this case I’m rather glad you did eavesdrop.”

“Eavesdrop!”

“How is my mother?”

Hamish scowls. “The woman watched her own daughter disappear before her very eyes. How do you think she is, Alice?”

“Confused, living in fear for her sanity, making excuses for my continued absence…” Alice hangs her head. “Thank you for visiting her, for being a friend to her.”

“She isn’t the only one who is confused and living in fear for her sanity. It’s rather like visiting this place when I call on her.” Oddly enough, that is completely true. In a world populated by only he and Helen Kingsleigh, Alice had vanished as if by magic. In the wider world, however, she must be in seclusion – in mourning, according to Helen who secretly hires investigators to look into her daughter’s whereabouts. “You really must come back,” he gently but firmly instructs her.

“Must I? Even though I don’t belong there and never will?”

Hamish allows his silence to speak for him. It seems an easy decision to make what with none of
But he is not endeavoring to start an argument with her. “I’ll be sailing to China soon,” he informs her. That and no more. Alice is bright enough to realize what that will mean for not only Hamish but for her mother as well.

Alice bites her lip, eyes shimmering once again in the firelight. And then she shakes her hair back over her shoulders, rallying and rising to the challenge he’d laid before her. “It will be a marvelous adventure,” she replies with frustratingly predictable single-mindedness.

But, Hamish has to allow that she’s right. “Yes, I expect it will be.”

“Look at us. Who would have thought that we would be making our own paths like this?” Her voice cracks, breaks and shatters on the final spoken word.

Hamish resists the urge to fidget as he recalls the fact that Alice certainly hadn’t expected to be here, in this strange Other Place, alone. She’d hoped that the Hatter would be with her, would have chosen her as she had chosen him. Or rather, as her heart had. Hamish has never had any interest in knowing Alice’s heart, but he does know it, and as such… as such…

With a sigh, Hamish puts an arm around Alice’s shoulders which are unattractively hunched. He leans her against him and murmurs nonsense into her hair as he had seen his mother do to one of his younger cousins not so long ago following a tumble, a scraped knee, and torn dress. Alice is not unlike that little girl, he knows. She will survive this, withstand it, and overcome it in due time. But for now, well, he may not be her fiancé, but he is her friend. He cannot trounce the Hatter for breaking her heart, but he can do this much.

Therefore, he does.

Alice snuggles into him, her hands fisted on her lap, and he allows the softly flickering fire to lull him into closing his eyes. Not to sleep of course, but just to rest, just for a bit. He listens to the soft crackle-pop-hiss-plop-plink-pitter-patter—

“Pardon me, sir!”

Hamish startles, dropping his walking stick and nearly squashing his hat under his arm. He shouldn’t be surprised to find himself still inside his family carriage with the rain pouring down and creating a cacophony of wet drumbeats on the roof. He shouldn’t be surprised to see the coachman in his rain slicker, holding the door open for him. He shouldn’t be surprised to see the wharf just beyond where several vessels have been securely moored. He shouldn’t be surprised to no longer feel Alice’s weight and warmth cuddled against his side. He shouldn’t be surprised to see two tiny water-darkened spots on his jacket shoulder which look suspiciously like a pair of tear stains.

He shouldn’t be surprised by any of it. And yet, somehow, he is.

Chapter End Notes

In shoemaking terms, a “grinning” seam refers to loose stitching. The thread isn’t taut so the leather separates and looks as if it’s grinning.
Chapter 9

Cold, soggy Underland autumn chills abruptly into a snow-drifted winter. Having only seen such pristine blankets of snow during visits to the Ascot estate in the country for Christmas festivities—something in which Alice has not partaken since her father’s death—she rather enthusiastically romps around in the snow whenever given the opportunity and a companion large enough to not get lost in the piles. Luckily, Hamish, despite being on his way to China, accommodates her at somewhat regular intervals.

“How did you come through this time?” she asks him when he lands with a startled “oomph!” in a particularly inviting snow drift.

Foregoing the opportunity to make a rather spectacular snow angel, Hamish struggles to his feet with a scowl, brushing himself off hastily. “I made the mistake of assuming it was time for bed apparently,” he mutters.

Alice laughs. “Well, you’re certainly not prepared for inclement weather!” she informs him, noticing the fact that he’s dressed in only his trousers, shirtsleeves, and waistcoat. It startles her a bit to see him without his cravat and jacket, but she supposes that even Hamish must make concessions to life at sea. “Let’s find you a pair of mittens and a muffler and then you can tell me about your latest stop in port.”

Although Hamish makes a face at the mention of borrowed mittens-and-a-muffler, he doesn’t object. They take tea with Cordwain and Mally, with whom Hamish has gotten into the habit of exchanging stories, oddly enough. To Cordwain, Hamish occasionally manages to make a fitting, droll comment. Watching her childhood friend deal with her employer’s eccentricities makes her wonder how he might fare against someone equally (and delightfully) mad, but no. Alice turns her thoughts away from other mad minds and forces a laugh at the rebuttal Cordwain tosses at Hamish, looking, for all of Underland, like the most pompous hare in existence.

The laughter helps. She wouldn’t call it medicine, per se. But it helps.

“Is this your design, Alice?” Hamish asks one bitterly cold and blustery winter evening. He’d taken to keeping a coat here in Cordwain’s house so he doesn’t seem as woefully uncomfortable as when he’d first started popping (and plopping) in. On this particular occasion, Alice had passed by the kitchen door in time to see him bang his knee against the side of the metal bath tub in which he’d been seated.

“What in the devil is this thing doing in the— Oh. Alice.”

“Good evening, Hamish,” she’d replied and then, with a glance at the tub he’d been levering himself out of, had continued, “It’s in the kitchen because this is where we’ve been taking baths. It smells better in here than the workshop but is just as warm.”
He’d frowned – something he seems to do quite a lot, Alice has noticed – and grumbled something about common-this and servant-that. Alice had chosen to ignore him and the visit had begun that much more pleasantly for it.

She glances up from the repairs she is making to a unicorn’s snowshoe and finds herself staring at a page from her sketchbook, held aloft in Hamish’s hands.

“Er, yes, that’s my design.” Such as it is. She’s aware that her skills in art will never be envied. But working with shoes so intimately and regularly has given her a sense of their shape, which she had translated onto the page with less frustration than usual.

Hamish turns the sketch around to study it more thoroughly now that she’s aware of his perusal, enjoying her discomfort, no doubt. The silence stretches between them and Alice’s fingers tighten around the snowshoe little by little with each passing instant. He’s the first person to see her design. She hasn’t even asked Mally for her opinion on it yet.

And then Hamish looks up and grins. With a twitch of his chin, he pronounces, “I rather like it!”

His enthusiasm is like a knife in her gut. Her heart throbs. She remembers another voice saying nearly those very same words once upon a Griblig Day…

“Alice?”

“Oh,” she very nearly outgribs (a perfectly natural reaction to the power of the emotions choking her). Looking up, she assures him, “I’m fine.”

And yet those words are even worse than the ones spoken before them.

Hamish sets aside the sketchbook and sits himself upon the bench opposite Alice. He braces his elbows on his knees and stares at her expectantly. She’d left him waiting for her answer once before and decides it would be horrid manners to do so a second time.

“Why can’t I forget about him?” she whispers, locking her jaw so that her lips do not tremble and her face does not tighten. She has learned that such a gesture only manages to push the tears out that much faster.

Hamish sighs. “Perhaps you’re not meant to.”

“Yes, I know.”

Alice shakes her head. “He never writes, never comes calling…”

Hamish doesn’t ask her if that’s what she truly wants, bless him. She’s honestly not sure of what she wants. Only… only she still wants the Hatter to want her.

She sniffs back her tears with a deep breath. “But never mind. Did you know, Hamish, that the White Queen is having a new steam locomotive engineered? We’ve heard that the service will resume this spring. Then the castle will be only a few hours’ ride away. I’ll finally be able to introduce you properly.”

“I look forward to it,” Hamish replies warmly, ever the gentleman.

Winter gives way – with great and windy reluctance – to spring in Underland. Hamish reports on his travels to Africa, India, and his final destination of the port of Hong Kong. He begins keeping
packages of tea in his jacket pockets so that he can offer them up to Alice and her superior brewing skills.

Weeks pass and Alice’s sketchbook fills to bursting with drawings and diagrams for shoes of all sorts until, one day, Hamish simply presents them to Cordwain (while Alice struggles ineffectually to retrieve her artwork from his longer grasp).

The hare stares at the illustration on the foremost page and then grabs the sketchbook. Alice’s heart stops as he rapidly flips through the entire contents and then tosses the lot into the fire.

Hamish gapes, utterly stupefied.

Alice desists in her struggles, too shocked to feel defeated yet.

Mally swallows a gasp as the pages begin to curl and smolder among the embers.

Cordwain looks up at Alice and then nods once and states, “Yer ready.”

“Excuse me?” Alice whispers, still in shock.

“Stop doodlin’ and start doin’,” he barks. “Ye’re gonna be sellin’ shoes, no’ sketches c’m this spring!”

It shouldn’t have been Hamish to whom she’d turned, smile painfully wide and eyes brimming with tears. It shouldn’t have been Hamish upon whom she’d leapt and laughed as he’d twirled her clumsily around in the workshop. No, it shouldn’t have been Hamish, but Alice can’t bring herself to feel sorry that it had been.

Now, as she braces the new shop placard against the outer wall, hammer in hand and six long nails held tightly between her lips, Alice listens to the sound of a steam engine rolling closer. She glances over her shoulder, through the Whotchworks village square and at the newly constructed train station and its single platform. Today is the first day of the new train service in the White Realm and these passengers will be the first visitors to Whotchworks of the new year. Perhaps some of them are even coming to have shoes made.

At that thought, Alice turns back around and endeavors to both brace the sign in place and hammer a nail into it all at the same time. An impossible proposition, yes, but only if she believes —!

“Would you care for some assistance with that, Madam Shoemaker?”

Alice looks up and smiles at the mayor. “Yes, thank you. If you could just put a hoof here, sir?” she asks the unicorn, who cheerfully obliges.

With help, the task takes only a few moments. They step back and admire the new sign, upon which Alice had carefully painted a ladies’ boot of Cordwain’s design and a man’s shoe of her own.

The unicorn sighs with delight. “Yes, I knew it was the right choice to believe in you, little girl,” he says and then, leaving Alice with the niggling suspicion that (perhaps) she has met this very unicorn before long ago, he trots off toward the train platform to welcome the visitors to the village.

Shaking her head, Alice opens the shop door and braces it with a cooperative stone. “We’re open for business!” she hollers toward the workshop where Cordwain is probably knocking around and disturbing all their carefully organized supplies.
“Aye!” he screams back. “’Tis tah-marreh!”

“That it is,” Alice acknowledges, taking a moment to look over the place she has come to call home. It is a new day and she’s ready for a new adventure.

*~*~*~*

After months of lying down in bed, turning the corner at the bottom of the stairs, stepping into rooms (and even one particularly memorable occasion upon which he’d just emerged from the unmentionable room in his new residence) and finding himself suddenly in Underland, when Hamish climbs into the carriage waiting to take him to the Hong Kong Trade Office for a very important meeting with local businessmen, he isn’t the least bit surprised to find himself seated across from the Hatter.

With a resigned sigh, Hamish glances around and discerns from the huff-huff-puff-puff of a steam engine in the distance, the landscape rolling past the open window, the rhythmic lurching of the room and the sight of the newly upholstered bench seat beneath him that he must be aboard Underland’s train which is now clearly in service.

“Ah, you again,” the Hatter greets him rather rudely.

Hamish sniffs. “Quite.”

The Hatter doesn’t look up from the collection of letters held in a disorderly mess in his right hand as he drums the very battered fingers of his left against a parcel wrapped in white packaging paper. Hamish eyes the decorative blue twine tied in a tidy bow on the top of the box and the particular combination of colors forces the oddest assumption to come to him. He says presumptuously, “You’re on your way to see Miss Kingsleigh.”

“No,” the Hatter replies. “I’m on my way to see Alice.”

Hamish squints at the man thoughtfully (and with no small amount of hostility). “For a man who hasn’t made the slightest effort to endear himself to her, you speak of her with far too much familiarity, sir.”

“We are family,” he replies simply.

“However did you come to that conclusion?”

Using the forefinger of his right hand, the Hatter flips the first page in his grasp over, bending it in half with a papery crackle, and begins reading (although the way the man’s eyes seem to travel in two directions at once, Hamish doubts that the man is capable of reading anything). “I invited her to stay and she did. She’s our Alice, now. Underland’s Alice. And as I did the asking, it rather falls to me to make sure she’s well.”

“And just how have you managed that these past few months?” Hamish challenges, disheartened to hear the man’s factual tone. It will break Alice’s heart again to hear that she is merely this man’s family, merely his responsibility, merely a young girl under his care.
“With these, of course,” the Hatter answers him, rustling the papers in his grasp meaningfully. “Letters from a dormouse.”

Hamish turns away and looks out the window as he breathes out a curse. For a moment, he entertains the idea of interfering again, of concocting some grand story about his undying devotion to Alice and how he’d gladly make her his wife. For a moment, he considers poking the Hatter’s heart with such a claim, hoping to glean some indication from his reaction that the man values Alice as far more than a wayward ward.

But no. No, he shalln’t do such a thing. Were the results unpleasant, Alice would be even more deeply and gravely wounded. And while Hamish might not agree with her decision to remain here in Underland when her mother is so obviously concerned for her welfare, he will not attempt to make Alice’s life more challenging. He is sure that if his visits continue, Alice will eventually come to her senses and go back with him. If he willfully interferes and Alice discovers his actions, all hope of her eventually coming to her senses will be lost forever.

Patience, while not particularly one of Hamish’s strengths, is necessary when dealing with someone as willful as Alice Kingsleigh.

The Hatter rustles through the letters in his hand again and Hamish glares out the window, his arms crossed over his chest. In the next instant, however, he sees a collection of bizarre, patchwork-like roofs of buildings and homes in the distance. The village ahead is unmistakably Whotchworks and, as the steam locomotive begins to slow, he stands and makes his way toward the exit, intent on reaching Alice first and warning her that the Hatter is on his way to pay her a visit. A moment or two to compose herself might make all the difference between an awkward and uncomfortable sojourn in Underland and a bearable one.

Thanks to his preparation, Hamish is the first passenger off the train when it hisses and sighs to a steamy stop beside the platform. He barely registers the fact that a unicorn is vigorously shaking his hand, welcoming him to town – Hamish mumbles something he hopes is suitably nonsensical – and then he’s striding as fast as his legs can carry him (with dignity, of course) in the direction of the shoemaker’s store.

“Alice!” he calls, forgetting about dignity altogether in his haste. He waves to her as she moves to step into the shop.

Pausing on the threshold, she turns toward him and grins. “You came on the train this time, Hamish?” she guesses accurately, her eyes twinkling. “Now that’s a proper arrival.”

“Quite,” he returns. “But listen, Alice. I met the Hatter on the train. He’s coming to see you and—”

Hamish chokes back the remainder of his bad news – “he thinks you’re his ward” – as Alice seems to pale. She bites her lip and takes a deep breath. Her hands shake as she smooths down her shopkeeper’s vest and pats her only-slightly wrinkled trousers.

“You look lovely,” Hamish anticipates. “Now, come show me these new designs of yours,” he further coaches.

“But you said…” Her hand flutters in the direction of the train platform where the passengers are still disembarking.

“And under no circumstances should you be seen waiting on him, Alice,” Hamish growls, beyond irritated at the thought of Alice welcoming the blighter with a bright smile. No, let him earn
Alice’s regard! “You are not a puppy, eagerly welcoming its master home,” Hamish continues brusquely.

Alice takes another breath and nods.

Excellent. Now that he’s prepared her, it’s time for a bit of a distraction. “Were I in the market for a new pair of shoes, what color would you say suits my disposition?” Hamish strikes a heroic pose.

Alice’s lips twitch. Playing along, she gives him an evaluating look and a wry smile. “Purple suede with pink and green stitching.”

He gapes at her, aghast. “Alice!” That’s all he can manage to squawk in affront.

She bursts into laughter at his look of abject betrayal.

“Alice?”

Hamish twitches and turns at the sound of a breathless, male voice. The Hatter stands stock-still not a half dozen paces away, gaping at Alice as if… well, as if he’s never seen a beautiful woman before in his life. Hamish purses his lips to keep the smirk from blossoming on his face.

Alice, bless her contrary, stubborn, bull-headed soul, merely turns toward the Hatter and, smiling with bland welcome, replies calmly, “It’s good to see you.”

The Hatter seems to have nothing to say in reply. Hamish watches the man continue staring, occasionally blinking, his bandaged hands twitching on the package he carries.

“How have you been, Hatter?” Alice asks pleasantly.

“Uh mum wib,” Hamish thinks the man answers, but he can’t be sure. A small flash of white on the threshold heralds Mally’s presence and Hamish shares a look with her as the Hatter’s fingers drum restlessly on the parcel in his grasp.

“And the White Queen?” Alice continues as if the Hatter’s response had been perfectly comprehensible.

“Th-th-the queen,” the Hatter stutters and then startles as he seems to take note of the object in his ever-kneading hands. “Yes, this. Sends this. She sends this kettle for you, Alice. It’s a kettle. A kettle in a box.”

As Alice steps forward to take it from him, he both thrusts it toward her and cringes back as if taken by a sudden fit of bashfulness. She reaches out. Hamish watches as one of her fingers inadvertently brushes the Hatter’s. The man nearly convulses. The package flies out of his hands, but Alice quickly retrieves it from the air and settles it in her steady grasp.

“Thank you,” she says, her thumb brushing back and forth over the blue twine.

“Th’ blue’s mine,” the Hatter says too loudly with eyes wide.

Alice gives him a shaky smile which he returns stiffly. “It’s lovely twine.”

Hamish relishes the awkward moment.

“Will you join us for tea?”

The Hatter blinks with confusion as if he’d somehow forgotten what tea is. More likely, he’s
The Hatter blinks with confusion as if he’d somehow forgotten what tea is. Well, that certainly won’t do! Hamish has been looking forward to the Hatter getting his comeuppance and he very much suspects that he has only just begun to pay his penance.

Hamish taps his boot to get Mally’s attention and then clears his throat meaningfully. Comprehension – and then conspiracy – dawns on the tiny creature’s face. “Oy, ‘Atter! C’mon in! Yah must stay f’r tea at th’ very least!”

“Right you are, Mally,” the man mumbles distractedly by way of reply. His own words seem to be a surprise to him and he scowls darkly at the dormouse, as if she’d somehow tricked him into accepting the invitation.

Hamish coughs to cover up a chuckle. It’s the first of many. And, for the first time, Hamish is glad to have stumbled into Underland suddenly. He wouldn’t miss the Hatter’s bumbling performance for anything in the world. Not even a crucial meeting with vendors.

The man trips over his own feet when Alice gestures for him to enter the shop, bangs his hat on the doorjamb, nearly crashes into Cordwain who waves a stropping stick threateningly and grunts, “Alishin, watch this lad’s feet, aye? He’s murdering th’ leather!”

“Oh, no no, only the time, I’m afraid,” the Hatter replies. “The leather is quite safe.”

But when he seats himself at the tea table beside Alice – a seat which he takes with great hesitance – he bumps his knee against the table leg, rattling the china. The man sloshes more tea into his saucer than he manages to swallow, Hamish is sure. He shares yet another look with Mally when Alice offers to refill the Hatter’s cup and the man promptly puts his elbow into the sugar dish, knocks the cream pitcher over with his napkin and drops his servingware on the floor.

“Spoon!” Cordwain announces with great importance. As Alice fetches the Hatter a new set of eating utensils, the old shoemaker gives the man a bug-eyed stare and counsels solemnly, “Behave yerself, lad, ‘r we’ll send yah home wi’out any supper!”

Hamish cackles softly around the bite of scone in his mouth at the Hatter’s slack-jawed expression. The bell over the shop door chooses that moment to ring, announcing the arrival of a customer. Alice deposits the clean teaspoon and butter knife beside the Hatter’s plate and dashes through the door to greet the new arrival.

“I thought I’d never see th’ day!” Mally crows, fairly bursting with glee. “Yah’re all a-twitter!”

“I am most definitely not,” the Hatter growls, glaring at the ruins of his place setting.

Cordwain blinks, snorts, and hiccups. “Twitterpated.”

Before the Hatter can refute this, Mally sing-songs, “Who’s that fellow a-trippin’ o’er hisself? Why tha’s the ‘Atter an’ ee’s got hisself a sweetheart!”

Cordwain giggle-hiccups, thumping his hairy paw on the table in concurrence.

Hamish has never seen such a fierce scowl on a grown man’s face before. It’s surprisingly entertaining. “It would appear, sir,” Hamish says with lips twitching, “that your Alice has grown up while you weren’t looking.”

The Hatter turns in his seat and peers through the open doorway. Alice’s voice floats into the kitchen from the room beyond as she assists one customer and then another. Oh, yes, Alice has indeed grown up and into a very beautiful and capable woman.
It’s with some regret that, when Hamish looks back at his tea companions, he instead finds himself alone in a carriage, being jostled about on the unpaved and crowded streets of Victoria City, Hong Kong. Oh what he would have given to be there when the Hatter finally makes his excuses – would he squeak them or stutter them? – and then hurries – tripping or stumbling? – across the small village square to catch the train back to the White Queen’s city.

“Twitterpated,” Hamish announces with relish, savoring the word and the memory of the man who had clearly been suffering acutely from the condition.

Chapter End Notes

+ Alice met a unicorn in Lewis Carroll’s novel – “Through the Looking Glass” – and their conversation is brief, but epic:
 `It didn't hurt him,' the Unicorn said carelessly, and he was going on, when his eye happened to fall upon Alice: he turned round rather instantly, and stood for some time looking at her with an air of the deepest disgust.
 `What -- is -- this?' he said at last.
 `This is a child!' Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude. `We only found it to-day. It's as large as life, and twice as natural!'
 `I always thought they were fabulous monsters!' said the Unicorn. `Is at alive?'
 `It can talk,' said Haigha, solemnly.
 The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said `Talk, child.'
 Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began: `Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too! I never saw one alive before!'
 `Well, now that we have seen each other,' said the Unicorn, `if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?'
 `Yes, if you like,' said Alice.

+ “Murdering the leather” is a shoemaking term which means to waste hide by making haphazard or poorly planned cuts.

+ “Twitterpated” is from Disney’s animated movie, “Bambi.” Oh, how I love that word.
“What is wrong with the Hatter?” Alice asks Mally as they watch the man nearly topple into the Wotchworks well at the center of the square on his way back to the train platform.

Alice is fairly shocked to hear Mally giggle in response. “Ain’t nuthin’ wrong with him.”

“But he’s so…” Words fail her.

“It’s called twitterpated an’ it don’ happen e’ery day, but when it does…” The dormouse sighs wistfully, indicating that being twitterpated is actually a good thing, although from Alice’s point of view (as she watches the Hatter dodge a lamp post and nearly impale himself on the mayor’s horn as the unicorn straightens up from smelling the roses in front of the flower shop), this twitterpated business looks rather dangerous.

“Will he be all right?” she asks worriedly.

“Oh, sure. Don’ be worryin’ ‘bout th’Atter. Twitterpation ne’er killed nobody.”

Although it appears to generate several very close calls, Alice decides when the Hatter returns to Wotchworks the following week and nearly walks into the shop door which he’s holding open for Alice. She reaches out to steady him, but the instant her hand touches his jacket sleeve, he convulses, dropping the basket he’d arrived carrying and knocking his head against the door frame when he hurriedly tries to grab it from midair. Feeling utterly helpless, Alice leaves the Hatter to himself, hoping he hasn’t been too badly hurt. She bends down to collect the basket and its spilled contents. Unfortunately, the Hatter had apparently decided that his head is perfectly fine and their hands end up bumping over a single green apple. This action somehow makes the Hatter lose his balance and—!

“Oomph!” Alice remarks as she finds herself lying flat on her back just inside the shop with the length of the Hatter pressed against her in a very intimate and heart-racing way.

“So—so—Alice!” he stutters, trying to right himself.

She inhales reflexively as soon as he gives her the space to do so and the scent of him invades her, makes her heart throb and her insides churn with urgent heat. Had he always smelled this good and she simply hadn’t noticed or had she somehow forgotten in the intervening months? Or could this be some sort of side-effect of the twitterpation? (Whatever that is!)

“Are you all right?” she asks him when he overbalances and, arms wind-milling, lands squarely on his rear near her feet.

“The apples. Yes. I’m spilled but the apples are fine.”
“Hm,” Alice replies, not knowing what else to say. This time, she lets the Hatter lurch toward the tumbled basket alone. She glances toward the kitchen, considering which variety of tea might be the most calming for both herself and the Hatter, and spies Cordwain framed in that very doorway. The old hare wobbles frightfully on his cane yet somehow manages to keep himself upright. A strange, crooked grin twists his hairy face and a devilish gleam twinkles in his eyes. Alice braces herself for either one of the shoemaker’s echoing and aromatic belches or a thoroughly befuddling (and quite possibly brilliant) series of observations.

The shoemaker announces, “This’s nae a tea shop, Hatter.”

“Oh, yes! I’m well aware—!”

“We’re shoemakers.”

“I can see that—!”

“Sae yah’re ‘ere f’r shoes.”

Alice blinks at Cordwain’s presumptuous conclusion. The Hatter visibly flounders. This man had saved Alice’s life on several occasions. The least she can do is stand up to a shoemaker on his behalf! “Cordwain!” she protests.

Her employer ignores her. “Or be yah ‘ere f’r summat o’her than shoes, lad?” the hare challenges, glaring at the Hatter with one eye wide and the other squinting suspiciously.

The Hatter twitches, glances wildly at Alice and declares in a desperate, strangled tone, “Shoes. Of course. This is a shoe shop, after all.”

Alice’s heart sinks at his words. From what Mally had implied, she’d thought… Well, she’d begun to think that perhaps the Hatter had come to see her again today because he—

But no. He doesn’t. Of course not.

“Ar, Alishin, be a lass an’ take th’ lad’s measurements,” Cordwain commands.

“Hatter,” Alice says thickly after a long moment, during which he merely stares at her, his hands kneading the air. Ignoring Cordwain’s hare-ish glare, she begins, “You—”

“Sit ‘r skedaddle!” Cordwain hollers rudely, pointing imperiously at the man-sized bench at the center of the room.

Alice is struck by the tableau. Not so long ago, it had been the Red Queen to point in such a way and the Hatter captive in her realm. Disturbingly, the Hatter merely sinks down onto the bench, utterly silent and still gazing at Alice.

Rounding on the shoemaker, Alice barks, “Cordwain Earwicket don’t you dare—!”

“Custom’s waitin’, Alishin!” he informs her on a hiccup and then stomps into the workshop, leaving Alice and the Hatter completely alone in the shop.

Sighing heavily, Alice turns her attention back to the uncharacteristically demure Hatter. “Hatter,” she whispers. Unthinkingly, she reaches for him, intending to lay her hand on his shoulder, but a flicker of his eyes toward her hand stays the motion. She fists her hand before dropping it. “You don’t have to request new shoes if you don’t want them.”

After a long moment, he asks softly, “Will ye craft ‘em, Alice?”
“If you wish,” she allows.

He lowers his head but not in a gesture of defeat. The Hatter peers at the ankle-high boots on his feet. “Mayhap ’tis time to consider a new path.”

Alice seats herself opposite him on the slightly smaller, badger-sized stool. “You needn’t choose today, here, or now.”

The Hatter looks up at that, his expression startled. “I fear I already have.”

Again, he watches her intently. She resists the urge to fidget. “Don’t fear, Hatter.”

“New things are frightful,” he argues.

“But they are only new for a moment, and then they’re not anymore.”

He gives her a wobbly smile.

Cordwain chooses that moment to hop-twitch-limp-stomp over to them and shove the measuring tape at Alice. “Th’ shoes go’teh c’m off firstwise,” the hare reminds her with a blink of his left eye and then his right.

With a sigh, she addresses the man who still makes her heart pound and her stomach tighten. “Hatter…”

In all honestly, Alice isn’t sure what she’d like to say. Something which would make everything all right. Something that would make him smile, reach for her, cradle her face in his damaged hands and press his lips to hers.

The Hatter leans away and hurriedly unknots the red shoestrings on his battered boots. Alice’s words – a tangle of arguments and reassurances – dry up and clog her throat as she watches his stained fingers nimbly work the laces loose. She allows herself only a brief moment – a mere blink of her eyes – to gather herself. Watching a man remove his footwear should not make her feel so flustered. It should not, but…

Her eyes startle open when a soft puff of Hatter-scented air brushes her cheek. He is sitting up straight once again and still staring at his shoes. With a deep, fortifying breath, he toes them off.

Now seated on the bench with his ankle-high boots in a heap and his magnificently bright, stockinged feet tapping against the wooden floor, he hesitates to look up at her. Her fingers tighten around the measuring tape tangled up in her grasp as she waits, breath held. She’s not sure what she’s waiting for… perhaps some indication that he wants this, that he welcomes her touch.

He squeezes his luminous eyes shut briefly and then lifts his chin with a decisive motion. When he turns his head to meet her gaze, she is startled by his wide-eyed stare. He is still afraid of something – her, perhaps? The idea would be laughable if only it weren’t a very real possibility – but his gaze is steady and his voice is clear:

“I’m ready, Alice.”

Oh dear…

She has to clear her throat twice before she can summon enough air to carry her words. “You’ll not feel a single tickle,” she promises and then kneels down and unrolls the tape.

It is surely the longest, the most arduous, and the most utterly silent foot-measuring of her career to
date. The Hatter is perfectly still as she applies the tool to the side of his foot, measures over and across, and then from the floor to his ankle. Strangely enough, he doesn’t even twitch when she lifts his foot and places his heel upon her lap so that she can measure along his arch.

Measurements committed to memory, she then places his foot back on the floor and collects the second. Through it all, he says nothing, merely watches. His breaths are slow and steady. Alice would say he feels calm only that would not explain the odd, electric crackle that seems to dance just beneath her skin, as if she is sitting in the very spot where lightning is about to strike.

“There,” she rasps, replacing his left foot upon the floor. She gathers up his discarded boots and holds them out to him. “If you’ll tell me which style of footwear you’d prefer, I’ll start working on them this evening.”

“Alice,” he whispers softly.

She glances up and meets his gaze, startled by how close he is, how warm his breath is upon her cheek, how very near his lips are to hers.

He swallows visibly and, with an obvious effort, turns his attention to his shoes. He collects them with shaking hands.

“The type I would prefer,” he further explains, looking thoroughly unnerved. “An Alice design.”

“And the height?” Alice prompts. “Function?”

The Hatter merely blinks at her.

“Color?” she tries.

The Hatter doesn’t answer.

“Shall… shall I decide for you then?”

His bright, bushy brows drawn together in a mournful frown, he nods once.

“Well, tha’s settled, then!” Cordwain declares, startling Alice so badly she nearly knocks foreheads with the Hatter. “Pu’ yer boots back on, lad, an’ off yah go! Alishin’as work teh b’doin’!”

Alice hurriedly backs up as the Hatter lurches to his feet. He still hasn’t put his boots back on. He clutches them to his chest as if their very presence is vital for his next breath.

“Yer new boots’ll b’ready in a for’nigh’!” the hare informs him. “Thar’s th’ door.”

Alice gapes at the scene before her. She has never witnessed Cordwain behaving so rudely to a customer… or even a visitor for that matter. In fact, he’s never even behaved thusly with Hamish despite the fact that the man had most certainly deserved it on several occasions.

Cordwain waits, arms akimbo, as the Hatter merely nods in obedience and moves toward the door, feet still clad in only his stockings. The sight of his bowed shoulders rallies her; she will not allow Cordwain to get away with this injustice!

“Hatter,” she calls, hurrying toward him.

He pauses on the threshold.

There had been a time only a few months ago when she would have taken his shoes from his
hands with little more than a glance and a grin of warning. Now, however, considering the terribly fragile state he appears to be in, she mutely holds out her hands for them.

After a long moment during which she feels his gaze scour her expression, he relinquishes them.

“Here,” she says, placing them on the floor, “you’ll need them until the new ones are ready.” Some imp within her rises to the fore and she hears herself tease, “It would be a shame to soil such magnificent stockings.”

When she looks up, there is a very small twinkle in his green eyes, as if a lost hope had been found and is taking shelter under a half-broken umbrella.

“I’m glad you came today,” she whispers, locking her knees to keep from leaning forward and into a kiss.

“As am I,” he squeaks softly, but his smile is genuine and nearly as bright as it had been on Griblig Day.

They stand there on the threshold of shoe shop, mutely staring and gently smiling until Cordwain noisily clears his throat. The Hatter startles as if suddenly waking from a dream. He steps into his still-unlaced boots and then gives Alice one last glance, touching his ever-bandaged fingers to the brim of his hat in farewell.

Alice watches him stumble and trip over the trailing laces as he crosses the village square, her heart pounding at his parting gesture.

Could it be…? Had he tipped his hat to her because his regard for her has deepened?

“Well, Alishin,” her employer drawls on a rabbity cackle, “looks like ye’ve shoework teh b’doin’.”

“I suppose I do,” she replies. And once the Hatter turns the corner and disappears from sight, she heads for the workshop and gets on with it.

Days later – days of naught but work, brief meals, and too little sleep – Alice regards the nearly-complete shoes on her worktable. These are not the first pair of shoes Alice has ever made, but she is determined that they will be the best. Perhaps they are not a masterpiece in art and color – although she certainly hasn’t left them bare! – but they will be shoes made by an Alice for her Hatter!

Her hands hesitate at that thought. *Her* Hatter? Now that is presumptuous! Simply because he’d asked for one of her designs and touched the brim of his hat in farewell that doesn’t necessarily mean—

“Tha’ Hatter’s a lucky mahn,” Cordwain declares, examining the boot Alice had just set aside to contemplate.

“Lucky?” Considering all that the man has lost, she rather thinks the opposite of that statement must be true.

“Oh, aye. A mahn’s lucky teh have anythin’ made with love. Most especially wear f’r ‘is achin’ soles.”

She turns her attention back to the nearly-finished shoes and gives them a speculative look. Is she making them with love as well as leather and laces? Perhaps she is. Well, what could be the harm?
With a smile she concurs, “Everything is better when it’s made with love.”

“Indeed,” Cordwain coughs and then staggers over to another candlelit table, leaving her to her labors.

*~*~*~*~*

“Well, you’re in a fine mood,” Hamish declares, seeing Alice’s hopelessly lovesick smile. The expression warms him even as it presents yet another obstacle to be overcome in his mission to convince Alice to return home. Still, he has accepted that the task will be one for the long term, so he has no qualms whatsoever in enjoying the fine spring day. He’d even arrived in Underland properly this time – on the stoop of the shoe shop with his hat atop his head and walking stick in hand.

“I adore making shoes, Hamish,” she confesses.

“Hm,” he replies, sensing quite a lot more behind the simple declaration. “And whose shoes are you making?”

Dare he hope that some other lad has caught her eye and earned her fancy? Or could it be that Alice is euphoric over a promotion of sorts?

“The Hatter’s,” she replies. Her smile dims as she glances toward him nervously.

“The... Hatter…” Hamish bites out, stopping in his tracks.

She nods, clearly bracing herself for his reaction. Hamish grits his teeth and thinks of the letter in his coat pocket. He’d finally summoned the temerity (with the aid of a bit of evening brandy) to read it.

The contents had broken his heart on Alice’s behalf. How utterly Alice of her to have chosen a man who clearly believes he can never love her in return, but who cares for her and her happiness. What a horrid mess. He had brooded over that letter for hours beside the fireplace, wondering what ought to be done with it, and he’d eventually arrived at one horrible conclusion: Alice must be told.

Her heart must be broken so that it may mend, so that she might consider returning home to her dear mother. Reading that note, it had become clear to Hamish that there is no future here for her, only a lifetime of making other people’s (and creature’s!) colorful footwear.

He’d taken to carrying the letter with him so that he could at last deliver it, and now that he has the chance…!

“Oh, Alice,” he begins, his frustration reaching the point of boiling.

“Hamish—” she interrupts.
“No, Alice. No,” he declares imperiously, raising his voice. He lets his temper rise for there is no one nearby to witness it. Upon his arrival in Underland this time, just as he had ducked into the shop, Alice had appeared from the workshop at the back, grinned, grabbed his arm, and announced a trip to visit some cliffs of some sort.

“I’m told Grampus Bluffs are especially magnificent this season!”

Hamish couldn’t care less if these bluffs have the ability to sing and dance. His primary concern is —

“You’re in love with him again!” he accuses.

“Still,” she corrects him stubbornly.

“Despite the thorough and unforgivable way he trampled your heart, Alice!”

“I can’t help it, Hamish! He’s the right man for me!”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I am.”

“That is not an answer.”

Alice throws up her hands and spins around, speaking to the forest that borders the footpath. “Is he confused or conflicted about something? Yes, he is. But, Hamish, you didn’t see him fight the Red Queen’s Knave. You never heard him lie to the Red Queen herself to keep me from being discovered. He…he…he took his hat off to me once but I was too full of my own silly notions that I was dreaming all this up to pay attention and then just last week he…”

“He what?” Hamish doggedly pursues despite sensing that this inquiry will only make the delivery of the letter he carries that much more painful for both of them.

“He’s afraid of something,” she confesses. “He has faced death and horror the likes of which you cannot even imagine, Hamish, but now he fears. And yet, despite that fear, he asked me to make a pair of shoes just for him. He smiled and he tipped his hat to me. Clearly, he’s fighting whatever terrifies him. How can I not love him for that?”

Hamish sighs. Heart aching, he beseeches, “Try, Alice. Please. This will not end as you hope it will.”

He watches the breath leave her. Her stance loses its righteous indignation. “What very bad thing do you think you know that I do not?”

He hates seeing the fear in her eyes, but there can be nothing for it. The time has come. She needs to know. “The Hatter, Alice. Tarrant Hightopp is… The deaths of his entire clan…”

Alice gasps. “How could you know about—?”

How, indeed. “He explained it in his letter.”

“His letter?”

Fully resigned now, Hamish reaches into his pocket.

“He sent correspondence to you?” she whispers.
Shamed, Hamish pauses, fingers just brushing the corner of the envelope. “No, it is addressed to you. Somehow, I intercepted it and… at first I was sure it was a mistake. But now that I’ve read it properly—”

“Properly?!” she squawks indignantly.

“It was clearly intended for you,” he concludes over her outrage.

Silence descends as suddenly as the argument had erupted. Alice glares at him. Hamish clutches the letter still within his jacket pocket. A breeze ruffles Hamish’s hair and only then does he notice that both he and Alice are completely tense, every muscle locked in place as if braced for battle.

Hamish wracks his mind for something to say, some way to diffuse this situation. Although he is loathe to admit it, it appears he owes Alice an apology for not respecting her privacy. He draws a breath, opens his mouth to utter the distasteful words—

“Oomph!”

Hamish hits the dirt path with a thud! He coughs on the dust that coats his mouth, winces at the throbbing of his head, and gasps for breath.

“Get away from him!” Alice screams at his assailant.

“Can’t do that, Champion. We’s gots orders.”

“Orders from whom?” she demands.

The sounds of a scuffle reach his ears and Hamish struggles to open his eyes. A ragtag band of very unsavory and mangy creatures surrounds them. A badger with a scarred face and an eye patch is tying Alice’s hands behind her back. She struggles valiantly, but she cannot break the creature’s grip.

A grinning wolf steps forward and says, “Th’ Lord o’ th’ Outlands. Ye and yer ginger here’ll be his guests.” The creature chuckles. “‘Tis quite th’ honor t’ be invited t’ th’ Tower o’ th’ Black King.”

Alice’s eyes flash. Hamish works on gathering his strength. Dear God, what had they clubbed him with? Is he bleeding?

“There is no such tower nor any such king,” she retorts furiously.

The wolf flexes his paws and sunlight gleams off of his dark, sharp claws.

“Of course there be. Th’ tower’s just o’er this ‘ere mountain an’ th’ king… Well, I guess ye’d know ‘im as Ilosovich Stayne.”

“Stayne!” Alice hisses, utterly enraged. For an instant, she seems to be on the verge of apoplexy, but then she simply stops… and then she looks at Hamish. “Can you stand up, Hamish?”

Gritting his teeth, he pushes himself up from the road. His suit is ruined, he’s sure. “Yes. As you can see, Alice, I’m fine,” he asserts for the sake of his pride.

“Good,” she replies. “Remember this: the tower over the Whotchworks mountain and Ilosovich Stayne.”
Rather than nod and upset his still aching head, Hamish asks, “Whatever for?”

“Remember it!” She glances at the wolf, who gestures toward one of his equally repugnant fellows.

“Tie ‘im up!”

Alice continues in a rush, “Find the Hatter and tell him where I am! Now get out of here, Hamish! Go back to where you came from and find the Hatter!”

In an instant, he understands what Alice is about. He steps forward and angrily accuses, “You can’t expect that just because you order me to go that I will. Besides, I’m not leaving you at the mercy of these—!”

A rock suddenly appears in front of Hamish’s toe, catching his shoe and sending him toppling forward. As the road rushes up toward him for a second time, Hamish closes his eyes, braces himself for, at worst, a broken nose and then…

“Ack!” he sputters, flailing against the garments pressing against his face.

“Sir! Sir, please allow me to fetch your coat.”

Running footsteps herald the approach of his butler. Hamish permits the man to pull him upright and out of the tiny hall closet. He blinks stupidly as the fellow apologizes profusely for the untidy assortment of shoes upon which Hamish had tripped when he’d reached for his raincoat.

His raincoat. Yes, he’d been about to head out to the trade office but, noticing the dark clouds looming on the horizon, he’d thought to grab his coat. He’d opened the closet door and found himself on the threshold of the shoe shop in Whotchworks.

Whotchworks, Alice, the woodland path to the bluffs, the brigands and…!

“The tower over the Wotchworks mountain and Ilosovich Stayne!” Hamish growls, his heart pounding anew. Those beasts had taken Alice and she’d kicked him out of Underland to fetch help!

“Sir?” the butler inquires as Hamish pushes past him, ignoring the offered coat.

He charges up the stairs in the small house, crashes into his room, dives for the bureau beside his bed, and fumbles for the handgun he keeps in the drawer. The cylinder is already loaded, but it slips out of his sweaty hands when he tries to fit it into place and bounces off his shoe before rolling under the bed. With a growl, he gets down on his hands and knees and reaches for it.

“Sir?” he hears the befuddled butler call once more. Hamish can only imagine the picture he makes with his head and shoulders wedged beneath the bed and his rear sticking up in the air. How undignified!

He hurriedly snaps the cylinder in place and wiggles out from under the bedframe. The quilt catches on his head and he reaches up with his free hand to bat the blasted thing aside. This, of course, further destroys his careful hair style but, given the circumstances, he can’t spare the time to be vain about it.

He braces himself against the bed, preparing to stand, and that is when he notices the very timely but mortifying fact that he is not in his bedroom in Hong Kong. He is in an exquisitely white tearoom and the furniture he’d just squiggled out from under is a table set for tea. His empty hand is resting on its cloth-covered surface. In his opposite hand, the gun feels suddenly heavy and
horridly conspicuous.

“Sir?” the butler calls again. Hamish swallows against the rising suspicion that he had passed into Underland the very moment he’d squeezed under his bed.

“Oh, blast,” he mutters. Hamish squeezes his eyes shut for a moment before forcing himself to face the music.

Whom he faces however...

“Good afternoon, sir. Would you care for tea?” a luminously white woman asks with a delicate gesture of her small, pale hands.

He gapes, gawks, and stutteringly recovers, “I... no. No, thank you, ah, madam. I am on rather urgent business. I must find the Hatter posthaste.”

“Oh? Well, in that case... Mister Swims?”

“Yes, your Majesty?” a large fish inquires, swishing forward.

“Please help our guest to his feet.”

“I’m fine,” Hamish grunts, standing and sliding the loaded revolver into his pocket. And then, belatedly adds, “Your Majesty.”

The White Queen – for really, who else could so white a woman be in this place? – sets aside her napkin and Mister Swims pulls out her chair for her. She rounds the tea table with mesmerizing grace and offers Hamish her hand.

“I shall take you to him.”

Discombobulated by this woman’s magnificence, Hamish clumsily accepts her hand and places it upon his arm. He waits for her to take the lead, but she doesn’t budge. He glances at her questioningly.

She arches a single black brow playfully. “If I might have the name of the gentleman whom I am escorting to the Royal Hat Workshop?”

Oh, bugger all. “It’s Hamish, your Majesty. Hamish—”

“Hamish,” she repeats, evidently uncaring of his proper title and distinctions. “A pleasure. We shall have to have tea when your business with the Hatter is concluded.”

“I look forward to it, your Majesty,” he replies automatically, but with sincerity.

“Call me Mirana,” she whispers back with a wink and then floats toward the door.

Feeling utterly ungainly, Hamish stumbles along at her side as best he can. Truly, the woman makes him feel as if he is a boy again. If she weren’t so utterly enthralling, he would be beside himself in mortification at his own clumsiness.

“How is it you found yourself under my tea table, sir?” she asks as they stride down a breathtakingly lovely corridor.

“Oh, I was fetching the pistol’s cylinder from under my bed, your Majesty.”

“I see,” she drawls. “I trust your pistol is now assembled and… at the ready?”
He blinks at the playful tone. “Er…”

Her smile is wickedly female. Before Hamish can break out in a sweat, she continues, sobering somewhat, “I’m afraid this may not be a good time to speak with the Hatter. Twitterpation, while a blessing to the recipient, is often a curse for all those who must deal with him.”

“Er, is he still twitterpated?”

She nods. “And he will remain so until the one who is his perfect match proves her love for him.”

“The one—? His perfect—!” Mind racing, Hamish thinks of the letter, of the heartbreaking explanation and refusal of Alice’s affections. “But he already refused Alice once…”

“Hastily,” the queen acknowledges. “I cautioned him against acting rashly.” That devastatingly teasing grin reappears on her dark lips. “Which is why I asked a cat of my acquaintance to waylay any correspondence between the Hatter and our Alice.”

“You—!” he sputters.

“Yes. But let us save that topic for tea later. Here we are,” she announces gently, turning him toward the workshop door. With a subtle nod of her lovely head, she indicates that Hamish must be the one to knock.

He does so and then, when no response is forthcoming, he glances at Mirana for encouragement – which she delivers with a kind smile – and he opens the door.

The room is utterly pristine. Every button and thread has been put in its proper place. Every hat stand is vacant of headwear and arranged with military precision.

“Oh, dear,” the queen sighs, seeing this.

Hamish cares only for the fact that the Hatter is present… and clearly ignoring them. He sits at his own tea table which has been carefully arranged and yet appears to be untouched. The Hatter slumps in his chair, grasping his jacket lapels tightly. His chin is tucked down as if in slumber. He is not sleeping, however. Despite the fact that his hat is tilted low over his eyes, Hamish glimpses the slight quivering of the man’s mouth and dried tear streaks upon his pale cheeks.

“Oh, Tarrant. Must you pine for her so?” the queen asks with a note of exasperation.

“Mae twine weeks’r no’up yet,” he brogues thickly.

“Stuff whatever time limit you’re under,” Hamish declares, striding over to the man. “Alice needs you now!”

The Hatter turns his face away. “No, no. The shoes… I mustn’t before my feet are ready to be shod.”

“Sodding hell,” Hamish mutters. He grasps the Hatter’s shoulders and pulls him up from his chair. “They’ve taken Alice, you mope. Brigands and beasts have taken her over the Whotchworks mountain to some tower or other on the command of the Black King, Ilosovich Stayne!”

The white queen gasps.

The Hatter’s chin comes up slowly. As it does, Hamish glimpses the glittering orange of the
man’s eyes.

“Stayne ‘as mae Alice?”

“Yes,” Hamish manages.

“Yer Majesty!” the Hatter barks, his tone dark and nine varieties of rage.

Hamish shivers as a premonition comes to him: a premonition of him accompanying the Hatter on this quest to fetch Alice back from the fiend who has taken her. It is a premonition which fills him with dread, which makes his stomach cramp and his palms sweat. The Hatter’s next words do nothing to assuage his anxieties:

“Where b’mae claymore?”

Chapter End Notes

+ For the last 75 years, the Bannrock Device has been popular for measuring the length and width of a person’s feet. Alice doesn’t have one of those, obviously, as they hadn’t been invented in the Victorian Era. (I’m just really impressed that those things have an Official Name.)

+ And YES THIS IS SO CLICHÉ. (Admit how much you’re loving it. Go on. I’ll wait until you’re done.) I’ve never written a Stayne-kidnaps-Alice fic before and figured, what the hell, I’ll give it a try. And, guys, GUYS! This is waaay more fun than I expected it would be. OMG. YOU’RE GOING TO LOVE THIS!
“I would really prefer to walk!” Alice chokes out, gagging on the stench of the creature which carries her slung over its mangy shoulder. Yes, she is genuinely willing to cooperate with her captors in exchange for an unimpeded supply of fresh air.

Initially, the potato sack they’d installed over her head had provided a modest – if earthy – buffer. Now, however, it merely gathers the stink in increasingly concentrated quantities. The potato sack had been forced upon her “fer s’curity” according to the wolf in charge… although security is rather a moot point now that Hamish has gotten away with all the pertinent information concerning both her destination and the enemy; it’s only a matter of time before he stumbles back into Underland, finds the Hatter, and a counter-assault is launched upon the “Black King.”

“Surely we are far enough from Whotchworks that I won’t know the way!” she pleads.

“Ar, she’s gots a point, Barker.”

There’s a beat of uncertain, waffling silence. Eagerly seeking to press her advantage, Alice takes a breath and nearly heaves right into the sack. “Set me down or I shall be violently ill, sirs!”

“Set ‘er dauwn, Dungo. Th’ king don’ wan’ no harm t’ come t’ th’ Alice.”

Alice grits her teeth against the wave of dizziness which accompanies the sudden reversal of her position. Head now right side up rather than bumping along against some creature’s fetid rear end, she shakes her head slowly from side to side, generating a bit of a breeze within the sack. If her hands hadn’t been bound behind her back, she might have dared to lift the thing a bit to receive a fresh supply of air.

“Don’ keep doin’ tha’,” someone orders gruffly, “‘r ye’ll get a crick in yer neck.”

“Then kindly remove the sack,” she gasps, her eyes still watering and stomach rolling.

“Er, well, ‘is Majesty says—”

“Lift it, Gorben.”

Alice freezes at the sound of that voice. She swallows an oath and wonders when they’d passed out of the mountain terrain and into the tower they’d spoken of. Had Dungo’s stench truly been so discombobulating? It must have been, because as soon as the sack is snatched off her head and Alice shakes back her tangled hair well enough to get a good look at her surroundings, she discovers that she is indeed indoors. More specifically, she’s standing on a long, black carpet in an ominously shadowed throne room.

She has no notion of the size of the room. Even the throne upon its dais has been cast in shadow. She can only just make out the outline of the chair and the head of the man seated in it: the Black King, Ilosovich bloody Stayne.

“So, you decided to stay in Underland after all, Alice,” he drawls in that sickeningly oily tone of
Alice feels her nose wrinkle in answer to the assertion. Remembering how very much the man enjoys listening to the sound of his own voice, she doesn’t bother to show off the witty reply which springs to mind.

“You don’t know how pleased that makes me,” he continues, leaning back in his chair of self-importance.

Alice merely arches a brow.

He chuckles knowingly, as if her droll expression is charming rather than insulting. Perhaps, according to him, it is. She’d always suspected that the man is terribly unbalanced and highly irregular. Slithering for so long at the maniacal Red Queen’s behest could not have been beneficial for his sanity in the long term.

A motion in the darkness from the man upon the throne makes her tense. A moment later, she realizes there is no cause for alarm… yet. He’d merely spread his arms wide in a gesture meant to direct her attention to the supposed grandeur surrounding them. “What do you think, Alice? It’s a promising start to a new reign, isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t say,” she hears herself reply in a bored tone. “I can’t see much of it.”

“Of course!” he laughs, his voice thick with mockery. “How remiss of me to forget the lights!” Stayne snaps his fingers and two of Alice’s half dozen captors leap to obey.

The first thing Alice notices in the flare of the torchlight is that the Black King’s tower is rather… small. The second thing she notices is that Ilosovich Stayne, who had once towered as the tallest of men in Underland, now seems to have been, er, cut down to size.

He stands and strolls down the steps from the throne, bypassing a smaller seat set a step below his, and swaggers over to Alice as if he is indeed still eight feet tall and not nose-to-nose with the White Queen’s former champion.

The former knave’s unexpected shrinkage is a temptation too inviting to resist.

“You appear to have lost some… standing since we last met,” Alice points out with a little too much relish.

Stayne, busy posing for his henchmen, rounds on her. His black-gloved hand tangles in her hair and pulls relentlessly downward. She schools her face to impassivity (or as near an approximation as she can manage). She will not allow him to see her wince or cringe. Not unless it is to her advantage to do so!

“Truly? You’re looking rather small at the moment,” he growls, looming nearly as large as he had once been. But it is only an illusion, she knows.

“This is how you think to belittle me?” Alice retorts with disgust. “Pishalver would be more effective.”

“Indeed it would,” he replies with soft menace and a sharp smile. “But no, it is not I who will have that honor.”

Alice braces herself as best she can considering the relentless pressure in her hair and her still-bound hands behind her back.
“Darling…?” Stayne calls in a nauseatingly sweet tone.

A moment later, a second figure steps out from the black curtains framing the dais and passes a small, pale hand over the smaller and lower throne as she approaches. Out of the corner of her eye, Alice recognizes a much smaller-headed Iracebeth of Crims clothed in a horribly stiff, black gown. “Yes, my king?” she replies with such devotion that Alice has to swallow back a mouthful of bile.

Stayne grins. “May I present to you the Alice you requested.” With a flick of his wrist, he forces Alice’s face toward the former Red Queen.

Alice’s gaze meets the woman’s eyes which are unfocused with pure, mad, manic glee. For the first time, Alice fears she may truly need the help she’d sent Hamish to fetch in order to get out of this.

Iracebeth coos, “She’s lovely, dearest. You are too generous.”

“Enjoy your new pet, my love.”

Alice’s gasp of denial is cut off by a blow to the back of her legs which causes her to crash to her knees. She glares back at Stayne, the rotter, and swears she’ll have his other eye for daring to strike her.

“But this is hardly fair, my muffin,” the queen argues with a childish pout. “Where is yours?”

Stayne smiles. “Don’t you worry, darling. He’ll come.”

Alice doesn’t have to guess who Stayne’s pet is meant to be. And she is very much afraid that Stayne is correct. The Hatter will come. Alice is not sure where her relationship with the Hatter stands now, but she is sure that he is, at the very least, her friend. And a friend with a sword, at that. Very useful in most disadvantageous situations. Except, perhaps, for this one.

“In the meantime, however…” Stayne continues and holds out a thick collar and a leash to a gleeful Iracebeth. “Have fun, my sweet one.”

Alice grits her teeth in answer to this rather unwelcome turn of events. Oh, she’ll find a way to get through this, but so help her, if Hamish dawdles on his quest or if he allows the Hatter to launch a rescue all on his own…!

Well, Alice is sure – after a day spent with the now-deflated but utterly unhinged Bluddy Behg Hid – she’ll have a very expansive repertoire of tortures to unleash upon him if he fails.

*~*~*~*~*

Hamish is reasonably certain that he is doomed.

True, he’s had all day to get used to the idea, but now it seems somehow more… imminent. Perhaps his unease is building due to their increasingly close proximity to their goal.
In the Royal Hat Workshop, the Hatter’s reaction to learning of Alice’s capture had been disturbing. Waiting outside – in the workshop corridor – for the man’s bloody claymore to be fetched from the armory had been equally nerve-wracking. (Not to mention the sight which had greeted Hamish when the Hatter had burst into the hallway clad in an archaic Highland kilt of all things! It’s a pity the sword had been delivered at that precise moment or Hamish might have somehow persuaded the man to don a proper pair of trousers!)

The dash to the train platform and subsequent two hours spent confined to their seats had been rather torturous. Hamish had endured several fiery orange glares before admitting that Alice had evicted him from Underland so that he might fetch assistance. The man had been only slightly mollified when Hamish had confessed that Alice had asked for the Hatter specifically.

The race against time had resumed the moment the train had hissed to a stop at Whotchworks Station. The Hatter had glared wordlessly until Hamish had taken the lead and set off on the path upon which he’d last seen Alice. From there, the Mad, Kilted Hatter had picked up her trail.

Painful hours filled with bruised shins, blistered toes, and aching muscles later, it occurs to Hamish that Alice had known that Tarrant Hightopp would hasten to her rescue despite having refused her affections. What Hamish does not understand is how she had known this, given the disintegration of their past camaraderie.

“Why are you doing this?” he puffs out, scrambling over yet another large boulder and wishing they’d used the mountain trail rather than trekking “direct-wise.”

“’Tis easier than movin’ th’ rocks,” the Hatter replies. He vaults over yet another obstacle between him and the summit of the mountain, inadvertently giving Hamish yet another unwanted view of his bare knees.

“No, no,” Hamish mutters irritably and refuses to allow himself to wonder if the man had remembered to wear his smalls beneath that damned skirt. “No, why are you so keen to save Alice yourself when you hardly—”

“Mae Alice,” the Hatter corrects him, snarling.

Ignoring the proprietary tone, Hamish blusters, “I fail to see how she can be your Alice when you cast aside her affection so easily, as if both she and her regard for you were of no worth at all!”

The Hatter pauses momentarily before climbing over another jagged rock. “Alice and her affections have always been of considerable worth.”

“So why did you refuse her?”

“It would not have been right to accept. Not when my own heart is not whole.”

Having read the Hatter’s letter to Alice, this statement is not as nonsensical as it could have been. Still, a wounded heart is hardly a hopeless conundrum. “Many men have had their hearts broken, sir.”

“But not all have recovered.” The Hatter pauses and turns to Hamish. “How could I ask her to accept mine, shattered and useless as it is while hers is yet whole and capable?”

Hamish considers the man’s somber expression. He still finds it unbelievable that Alice has chosen this man. Is she truly willing to look into this mad, pale face every day for the rest of her life? He cannot understand it. When the Hatter begins to turn back to the path he is making through the wilderness, Hamish daringly confesses, “You spoke of this in your letter.”
“My letter?”

“Yes, the one you sent to Alice. A cat—well, um, a smiling cat saw to it that I intercepted it.”

“Chessur,” the Hatter mutters crossly.

When the man says nothing else, Hamish presses, “Were you sincere when you said your heart is well and truly broken?”

“That is what I wrote.”

“Because of the deaths of your clan?”

“Yes. I am the last Hightopp thanks to the Jabberwock.”

The creature’s name sounds familiar. Hamish squints in thought. “The Jabberwock which Alice killed?”

“Aye. ‘Twas fated that she would. She’s awur champion.”

From champion to shoemaker: Hamish isn’t sure if the career change is a demotion or a wise decision on Alice’s part. Speaking of which…

“Why do you suffer such anxiety in her presence?”

“’Tis no’ anxiety bu’ th’ twitterpation.”

“And precisely what is that?” Hamish doggedly continues.

“Twitterpation—” The Hatter sighs with thinning patience. “—occurs when a male of Underland meets a female whom he suits perfectly.”

“A perfect match?” he echoes, recalling that this is precisely how the White Queen had phrased it.

“Aye.”

“But how can that be? The two of you were constantly quarrelling before.” Or so it had seemed to Hamish.

“Of course we quarreled; we were at odds!” The Hatter sighs yet again. Heavily, this time. “I invited Alice to stay in Underland and she accepted. As my ward and an honorary member of my family, I wanted only to protect her and preserve her happiness. But Alice didn’t want to be a guest. She wanted responsibilities and duties and… I was not ready for her to finish growing up.”

“Sir, if what I’ve heard is true, then Alice fought a battle and slayed a beast on behalf of the White Queen. How could you presume to label her a child?”

“Children play war games,” the Hatter argues. “‘Tis th’ adults who do th’ cleanin’ up.”

“So, in summary, you don’t love Alice—”

“I cannot. Not with a heart that is broken.”

“—yet she is your perfect match and thus your Alice.”

“Precisely.”
“This entire business, sir, is folly. If a broken heart is as insurmountable an obstacle as you claimed in your letter, then why are even bothering to—?”

“She’ll fix it,” he insists softly, surely. “She will. She’s th’ o’ly one who can.”

“Your heart?” Hamish confirms.

“Aye.”

Utterly lost in the man’s mad logic, Hamish grumps, “Oh, botheration. Never bloody mind.”

Suddenly, ahead of him, Tarrant Hightopp pauses. “Hamish,” he begins hesitantly, turning around slowly.

The sound of his proper name (rather than a rude insult) shocks an equally civil response from him: “Yes?”

“I have two favors to ask.”

Hamish nods. “Let’s have them, then.”

“First, if you still have my letter to Alice…?”

Hamish nods again and thinks of the envelope still in his jacket pocket.

“Never let her see it.”

“Agreed. And the second favor?”

The Hatter motions him closer. Hamish navigates the three steps between himself and the man, closing the distance between them. Suddenly, he finds himself standing upon the ridge of a mighty mountain range. Beneath him, a rocky and utterly inhospitable valley unfolds. In the heart of it, perched on the edge of a great precipice, is a frightfully tall tower, the Tower of the Black King, Ilosovich Stayne. It stands like a single piece left upon a chessboard: isolated, victorious, and ominous.

Hamish glances at his companion worriedly. “I hope this second favor has something to do with us managing to get inside that beastly structure successfully.”

“It does!” The Hatter grins widely and then, with a flourish, whips his top hat off of his head. “Head my hat.”

Numbly, Hamish accepts the headwear. He gapes at the Hatter’s happy expression.

“Well, go on. Put it on. We’ve a fortress to storm.”

Well, if this is all the man needs in order to get underway, then who is Hamish to argue? He plops the top hat upon his head.

The Hatter giggles. “Won’t Chessur be jealous!” the man crows and then begins making his way down the rocky slope, the wind whipping at his kilt.

With a sigh and a shake of his head at the man’s nonsensical utterances and even worse sense for suitable outerwear, Hamish follows after him and hopes, for Alice’s sake, that her faith in this madman is not as misplaced as his trousers.
Chapter 12

While Alice has certainly had better days, she takes comfort in the fact that this one is far from the worst of her life. Even an afternoon spent chained and be-collared, alternately ignoring and acquiescing to Iracebeth’s unimaginative and bossy whims does not rival the day her father had passed nor the moment she’d found herself utterly alone in Underland having just realized that when the Hatter had asked her to stay he hadn’t been offering all that she’d hoped for.

Oh, yes. In her life, Alice has suffered far worse than bruised pride and a throat rubbed raw by a thick, black collar. She has known worse things than shackled hands and screeched demands for her to fetch and carry, to rub her mistress’ aching feet and applaud the woman’s horrid performance at the pianoforte.

Although how they’d gotten the instrument in the tower to begin with, Alice confesses she is curious. Perhaps they’d built the structure around it. Or, rather, under it.

Alice glances over the low ramparts ringing the tower’s summit and forces herself to make an effort to measure the dizzying height. Even if she manages to free herself, she knows she has little to no chance of being able to climb down. No, she'll have to go back through the interior of the fortress itself.

How bothersome.

With a sigh, she turns back to the task at hand: unlocking the shackles which bind her hands. Luckily, Iracebeth had been rather amused by Alice’s workshop clothes and had only half-heartedly suggested that Alice wear the costume she’d been provided. Alice had taken a gamble and reached for the offered black garment eagerly. The former Red Queen had, predictably, snatched it away from her and ordered her to suffer the rags she still wears.

Alice smiles and reaches into one of the pockets of her linen apron. Her fingers close around one of several small tools therein. Pulling out the tiny hole-punch awl, which is little more than a very strong and sturdy sewing pin, she works it into the lock of the shackle on her left wrist. She doesn’t expect that she’ll be able to escape now even if she manages to free herself. The most she can do is test that it is possible to unlock her bindings so that, when her chance comes, she’ll be able to take it.

She just hopes that time will come before Stayne manages to capture the Hatter. Her lips curl in disgust. Iracebeth seems pleased enough to have a pet to do her bidding, but Alice holds no illusions regarding Stayne’s motives. It had been because of the Hatter that Stayne had lost the battle on Frabjous Day. Additionally, it had been because of the Hatter that Stayne’s attempt on Iracebeth’s life had failed.

“How-ever did he manage to overcome that?” Alice mutters to herself, patiently working at the lock. Surely, Iracebeth had not responded well to the discovery that Stayne wished her dead. How had that oily snake gotten her to not only fall in love with him again but also support his
claim to the Black Throne?

Even though Alice is curious, she doesn’t expect to learn the answer to this question. Not when a much tamer inquiry had resulted in her being “put out for the night.” (That is, she’d been forced up the winding stair and chained up on the tower ramparts as if she’d been a misbehaving dog.)

She relishes the peace and quiet. And to think, all she’d had to say had been, “Whatever happened to your magnificently bulbous head, your Majesty?”

The relief at being away from Iracebeth still clings despite the strong, chill wind that blows so high up. She doesn’t bother to suppress her shivers. The gentle clanking of the chain covers the scraping of the awl in the lock.

Still pleased with herself, Alice glances down at the shackle. She turns the hole-punch a bit and pokes it slightly to the left and then—

Click!

Alice bites her lip to keep her whoop of triumph from echoing out over the Outland valley below. She regards her wrist and the shackle now resting open on her thigh. For a moment, she simply slumps against the cold stones, seated with legs crossed, smiling.

It’s a shame she’ll have to put the blasted thing back on. At least now she knows that she can free herself. Of course, she’ll have to wait for a time when the chain connected to her collar isn’t moored. Alice has no illusions about being able to pick the lock on her collar, but these shackles… Oh yes, these are no match for Alishin the Shoemaker! None at all!

She’s so thrilled with her accomplishment, that she almost doesn’t hear the sound of a step on the stone stairs. But she does hear it. Hurriedly, Alice conceals the awl in her right fist and maneuvers the unlocked shackle on her left wrist to drape so that it appears to be closed yet remains undone.

Alice has only a second to spare – during which she wonders (and dreads) who is coming up to the tower-top – before a man’s voice answers her silently asked question:

“I imagine you have questions, don’t you, Alice?” Stayne drawls, reaching the top of the stairs. He doesn’t turn toward her as he wanders toward the battlements to survey his kingdom, such as it is – rocky and barren and utterly lifeless save for the smelly creatures in his service.

From this angle, Alice can see his still-good eye and wishes that the Hatter had at least managed to put it out during the battle. Perhaps then the man wouldn’t be regaining his former height. It seems mad but, over the course of the day, Alice is sure that Stayne has grown an inch or two. Amazingly, his pride over her capture seems to be puffing him up with pompousness. She wonders if Iracebeth’s head will start swelling as well now…

The Black King chuckles. “I’ve been told you’re a curious creature. Well, prove it, Alice. Speak.”

She’d rather growl and tear out his throat with her teeth, but perhaps talking will be more productive. She briefly toys with the idea of luring him within range. Her fist tightens around the little awl; she imagines plunging it into his remaining eye…

But no. Iracebeth adores him. Were Alice to harm him and yet not successfully make her escape, the queen’s rage would be the death of her. Literally.

Swallowing her frustration, Alice clears her throat and says ingratiatingly, “You wooed Iracebeth
so well. I admit I’m…” She flounders, searches for a word she can cough out without vomiting.

“Jealous?” Stayne surmises with chauvinistic glee.

Alice has to *strangle* back the reflexive gag.

“You needn’t be, you know,” he continues happily. “Once the Hatter has been dealt with, things around here will change.”

“How so, your Majesty?” she wishes she didn’t have to ask. But, as long as Stayne is busy congratulating himself and confessing his plans, he is not making mischief. Also, every moment that passes is one moment more in favor of this interview being interrupted.

Stayne informs her, “I shall make an example of the Hatter. His death will be public and utterly humiliating. After that, no one will dare to rise against me here.” He chuckles darkly. “At which time, I’ll no longer have any need for Iracebeth or her mediocre alchemy skills.”

Stayne glances at Alice and confides with a smarmy grin, “The creatures here are rather primitive and wonderfully simple-minded. They fear what they do not understand.”

Alice considers this for a moment. She almost asks if Iracebeth had been schooled in alchemy just as her sister, Mirana, had, but that is not the matter of the moment and rather irrelevant. Besides, Stayne might grow *bored* if Alice asks about someone other than him. A bored Stayne is the one of the worst sorts, she’s sure. Nearly as bad as an amorous or emasculated Stayne.

Instead, Alice inquires as idly as possible, “How many Outland creatures did you have to poison before they agreed to build this fortress for you?”

“Only a few. Not too many, of course, and none young or comely. I have no use for their rage, only their obedience.”

“Ingenious,” Alice forces herself to compliment him, her stomach rolling.

“I am,” he agrees, smiling.

Alice has to restrain herself from cringing when he suddenly turns and takes a step toward her.

“You are very lucky, Alice,” he assures her.

Alice does not *feel* reassured. Nor does she feel all that lucky, truth be told. “How so, your Majesty?”

“Ah, your mind is delightfully simple, little Alice,” he replies, relishing the moment. “You see, when I no longer need Iracebeth, I will require a *new* queen.”

His grin widens and his gaze moves over her in a very *thorough* study. Alice’s skin crawls. She shivers in the biting wind. She glances toward the tower stairs, willing Iracebeth to show up and hear this, to perhaps throw the blighter over the wall herself and save Alice the trouble…

Stayne drawls invitingly, “She’s bathing. It’s a ritual which takes *hours.***

Alice doesn’t like the sounds of that.

Ilosovich Stayne takes yet another step closer to her and leans down to confide conspiratorially, “That’s *plenty* of time for the two of us to set aside all the games and get to know each other, don’t you think, Alice?”
Her answer is silent. She clenches her right fist even tighter and braces herself. Whether she’s ready for it or not, the chance she’d been hoping for appears to be waiting for her to simply stand up and take it.

Slowly, mindful of the open shackle she must keep balanced upon her rubbed-raw wrist, Alice gains her feet. What had started out as a very bad day – but not her worst day – may very well become worse yet. How much worse it will become is entirely up to Alice. She grips the awl and readies herself for whatever unpleasantness is looming on the horizon.

*~*~*~*

“Halt! Who goes thar?”

Sweating very badly beneath the monstrously tall and horribly battered top hat upon his head, Hamish keeps his hands at his sides instead of reaching up to loosen his too-tight shirt collar.

“Tarrant Hightopp, kind sir,” Hamish replies, doing his best to sound like a loony twit. It disturbs him that the task is not as difficult as he’d expected. “I’m here to see his Majesty, the Black King.”

“Are ye?” a very large and upright-walking wolf growls. Hamish hopes that these tower guards aren’t from the group of brigands who had taken Alice that morning. If they identify his scent, he’ll have some fast talking and even faster thinking to do. And, at the moment, Hamish’s mind is rather preoccupied with speculating on the Hatter’s mysterious whereabouts.

“Just how are we going to get in there?” Hamish had groused, crouching beside the Hatter behind a rocky ledge not far from the drawbridge.

“You are going to enter as me via the front door, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Hamish had mocked back, feeling a bit faint. “What about you?”

“I shall also enter as myself, but in secret.”

“Indeed?” Hamish had snarked skeptically.

The Hatter’d had the gall to wink at him. “I’ll meet ye on th’ inside.”

And that had been the end of the discussion. Hamish is just as dissatisfied with the results now as he had been ten minutes ago: the Hatter had slunk off, disappearing into the rocky landscape with that bloody claymore strapped to his back, leaving Hamish with only two options: comply or crawl back over the mountain and abandon Alice.

God help you, Hightopp, if I get run through for this.

“Be yah armed?” a second creature, a massive vulture croaks, poking his spear at Hamish’s middle threateningly.
Hamish endeavors to keep his stomach from cramping as he retorts, “Did I not just say that I am a hatter, sir? What use would any arms aside from these—” He waggles his fingers to demonstrate the arms to which he refers. “—be for hatting?”

“Aye,” the wolf grumbles. “Righ’ ye are, Mister Hatter.”

“Still,” the vulture replies, looking him up and down with suspicion. “We’s gots teh check.”

Thinking of the revolver still in his jacket pocket, Hamish merely lifts his hands in surrender. He only hopes that the derisive sniff that Hightopp had given the weapon means that guns are unknown in this world.

Hamish suffers the poking and prodding with breath held – good gracious, these beasts reek! – and knees locked to keep himself from sprinting off in a panic-induced bid for safety.

“Ah-hah! I found somethin’!” the wolf announces, lifting out the gun.

On his other side, the vulture replaces the letter that Hamish had promised the Hatter he would not be delivering to Alice. “Whot be that thing?” the great bird squawks.

The wolf turns it this way and that. When his hairy paws seem on the verge of cocking the hammer back, Hamish warns him, “Careful with that! A hatter’s tools are most necessary for his work!”

The wolf blinks at him. “I ain’t ne’er seen no hat makin’ tool like this.”

Hamish forces a smile and replies a bit too brightly, “Top of the line. A brilliant invention.”

The wolf glances at his fellow guard who shrugs his bony and scraggly-feathered shoulders. “Don’ look at me. I ne’er e’en seen a hatter’s tools afore.”

“Hum,” the wolf replies, slipping the gun – uncocked – back into Hamish’s jacket pocket.

“Thank you,” Hamish says and means it. “Now, if there’s nothing else, I have urgent business to discuss with the king. I believe he’s expecting me.”

“Well, why didn’ ye say so in th’ firs’ place!” the wolf nearly howls.

“For,” the vulture agrees. “If he’s expectin’ yah then don’ keep ‘im waitin’!”

“Ar,” the vulture agrees. “If he’s expectin’ yah then don’ keep ‘im waitin’!”

“My sentiments exactly,” Hamish says around the knot of tension in his too-dry throat. He does his best not to stumble when the guards wave him forward and point out the spiral staircase he’s to take.

“Fourth floor,” the wolf instructs. “If ‘ee ain’t there, try the top o’ the tower. Likes to watch the sunset up thar, don’ee, Ralpert?”

The vulture nods. “Luv’leh view…”

Certain that he’ll be run through with those dull spears the moment his back is turned, Hamish nonetheless puts one foot upon the first stone step and begins his ascent. When he is halfway to the first landing, he relaxes enough to glance from shadow to shadow, searching for a tuft of bright orange hair and the gleam of steel. Hamish can only assume that the Hatter had snuck in while Hamish had been distracting the guards.

“Bloody-minded fool,” Hamish grumbles, realizing that the Hatter must believe him to be
unarmed which is why he’d been given the task of being the diversion. Well, certainly, the guards never would have let the Hatter’s great, enormous claymore past the gate. Not knowingly.

Hamish hurries his steps, now racing to catch up with Tarrant Hightopp who must have gotten a head start in the rush to Alice’s rescue.

“I’ll not let you have all the glory for yourself, you blighter,” Hamish growls softly.

At the fourth floor, the throne room only requires the briefest of inspections to determine its vacancy. Hamish charges up the stairs again, his leg muscles burning and lungs raw. He clamors past a door which is slightly ajar. From within he thinks he hears the sounds of hair being brushed and a song being hummed by a woman. Knowing full well that Alice cannot carry a tune to save her life and having no interest in peeping in on a woman’s toilet, Hamish soldiers onward. He rounds what he hopes will be the last curve of the stairs and—

“Nunz!” the Hatter hisses, putting out a hand to stop Hamish’s fanatical charge.

Deprived of his momentum, Hamish leans down and, bracing his hands upon his knees, does his best to catch his elusive breath. Just beyond the Hater’s orange-topped head, Hamish sees clouds and a darkening sky. The top of the tower is near, then. Which means so is Ilosovich Stayne, the Black King.

If Hamish weren’t so bloody exhausted, he’d probably be terrified.

The Hatter glances at Hamish irritably and presses a bandaged finger to his own lips. Hamish suddenly hears his own panting breaths echoing in the stairwell and cups his hands over his mouth. The Hatter then turns his still-yellow gaze upward and waits.

A moment later, the wind above calms and a man’s voice can be heard but only just barely.

“Really, little Alice, there’s no reason to be coy—!”

The Hatter growls. Hamish reaches out a hand to grab the man’s arm; they cannot rush pell-mell into the unknown!

But then a woman’s sudden and truncated scream echoes in the valley. All thoughts of danger and mad dashes abandon Hamish as he barrels up the remaining steps in the wake of the Hatter.

What he sees when he reaches the top, however…!

“Alice!” the Hatter cries with delight.

The woman in question looks up, startled. Slowly, a grin forms on her face. “Hatter!” she answers.

Hamish watches as the chain she’d wrapped around a black-clad man’s throat slips through her fingers and the supposed Black King crashes to the stones.

“Am I late?” the Hatter asks as Alice moves toward him until she’s pulled up short by what appears to be a silver chain anchored to the tower wall. Reaching her side, the Hatter allows Alice to clutch the lapel of his travel-dusted jacket.

“You are precisely on time,” she replies on a sigh. “I do believe I’ve just worn out my welcome.” Both the Hatter and Hamish follow her gaze to where the purported Black King lies prostrate and possibly dead.
When she looks up, she finally notices Hamish. “Am I dreaming? What on earth are you doing here in the place of the White Queen’s army? And wearing the Hatter’s top hat no less!”

“Leading your rescue, naturally,” he blusters, strolling forward and reaching for Alice’s shackled hands.

In reply, Alice merely lifts up her wrists, demonstrating the admirable fact that one is bare while the matching shackle dangles from the other.

“Ah. How resourceful of you,” Hamish commends her.

“Shoemakers have the best tools,” she informs him smugly, patting her pinafore pocket.

“Alice,” the Hatter growls, his thimbled and bandaged fingers investigating the barbaric, black collar around her neck. “Whot—!”

“Never mind trying to unlock it,” Alice replies. “Iracebeth has the key. Here,” she continues, reaching for the length of chain which keeps her tethered to the wall of the fortress. “If you could simply break one of the links with the tip of your sword, we’ll sort out this blasted collar later.”

The Hatter looks ready to argue, but the expression of hopeful expectation and absolute faith on Alice’s face seems to still his tongue. Hamish is frankly impressed. Perhaps the man really does care for Alice…

Then, suddenly, the black-clad man lurches upright from his ungainly sprawl. Rubbing his throat, he snarls at the Hatter who is a half-step behind Alice. The Black King’s hands fist and his shoulders tense. The man is a moment away from springing and the Hatter is frozen with surprise.

“Hightopp…!” the man rasps. He takes a single, rushed half-step in the Hatter’s direction. Hamish quickly sees a very bad situation developing. With Alice between him and the Black King, Tarrant cannot lift his sword.

Luckily, Hamish can offer assistance. He staggers backward, fumbling for the gun in his pocket. Alice balls up her right hand tightly and braces herself for the man’s charge.

Hamish cocks the hammer, steadies the gun in both hands, aims and fires—!

_BANG!_

He misses; the bullet lodges in the masonry just to the right of his target, but the gunshot has an interesting and pleasing effect.

Stayne flinches, delaying in his advance.

Alice pulls her right hand back and then slams her fist squarely into the blighter’s perplexed face.

The man staggers back, dazed. His boot heel then catches on the blade of Tarrant’s lowered claymore and his balance abandons him.

Hamish watches, frozen with morbid fascination, as the man’s arms windmill, his expression morphs into utter terror as his body teeters on the edge of the battlement.

And then the wind picks up, blasting him in the chest and sending him over the edge.

His scream echoes for several eternal seconds before it stops as abruptly as his body undoubtedly had upon the rocks below.
Hamish winces, imagining the grisly impact. Alice merely sighs and leans against the wall. The Hatter, one hand on Alice’s shoulder, dares to peer over the ramparts to assess the result of their combined assault.

“Strange,” the man muses after a moment of ear-humming silence. “I seem to remember the knave being significantly taller…”

Alice laughs, of all things.

“Mad begets madder,” Hamish mutters, shaking his head.

The Hatter giggles, his gaze fixed upon Alice’s smiling eyes. In that moment, Hamish realizes that he has been utterly forgotten. What can a man do in such a situation except bow to the inevitable? Broken heart or not, the Hatter will have Alice and, what’s more, she will let him. Hamish’s options are depressingly limited: meddle until he earns Alice’s contempt or gracefully accept her choice.

He sighs.

The wind whips by them once more, ruffling the Hatter’s kilt and further tangling up Alice’s hair. She shivers and Hamish hurriedly shucks off his jacket as the Hatter sets the tip of the claymore against a link in the silver chain resting upon the stone floor. With a quick twist of his upper body, the metal snaps in half. Alice smiles her thanks as Hamish places his jacket on her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she says to the Hatter and then offers a smile that is nearly as bright to Hamish. “Both of you.”

“Thank us once we’ve made our escape, Alice,” Hamish replies.

“Escape, yes. I suppose we’d best get started on that before the Bandersnatch is well and truly out of his cave,” the Hatter muses. Then, he reaches past Alice and plucks his hat off of Hamish’s head. Donning it once more, he announces, “Yes, now we’re ready! Alice, if you wouldn’t mind relinquishing the lead for the time being?”

“The lead is yours,” she agrees with a tired smile.

And lead he does.

Chapter End Notes

+ It’s not that I think the Outland creatures are stupid; they’re just harmlessly silly… but doing their best to survive under the rule of a bully.

+ “Nunz” is from Burton-verse. It means “halt” or “stop”.
in which freedom is gained and new shoes worn

Chapter 13

The Hatter leans forward and presses a quick kiss to Alice’s temple, glares apocalyptically at her collar, and then clamors down the steps. Alice glances at Hamish, meeting his equally wide eyes, and then hurries after the Hatter. Surely, that particular combination of actions cannot be as benign as they seem?

She’s right.

“Hatter!” she calls breathlessly as a woman’s surprised shriek reverberates up the stairs. Alice very nearly somersaults her way down to the landing outside Iracebeth’s suite in her haste to prevent the Hatter from doing something very messy.

Slamming a hand against the partially open door, she charges into the room and is greeted by the sight of the Hatter’s claymore held to the queen’s throat. Iracebeth’s face is pale with fear but her cheeks red with mortification. Personally, Alice can think of worse things than being caught in naught but a silk kimono and her knickers by the Hatter. Especially when his lean hips are wrapped in naught but the Hightopp colors.

“Th’ key,” the Hatter hisses, “’r yer royal jammies’ll b’ ruined.”

The sword gleams in the lamplight as he repositions the blade across her neck. Gasping for breath, Iracebeth points a shaky finger at the vanity.

Snarl still curling his dark lips, the Hatter growls, “Fetch.”

Alice blinks at his command and Iracebeth pales further. Could it be he’d guessed how Alice had been treated by this woman? Alice makes a mental note to never underestimate the Hatter’s deductive reasoning and intuition.

Iracebeth’s hands shake as she removes a brass key from an ornate, carved onyx jewelry box and offers it to the Hatter. He plucks it deftly from her grasp, so deftly that Alice is sure he hadn’t even touched her skin.

“Watch ‘er,” he growls at Hamish who, with gun in hand, steps forward to prevent Iracebeth from interfering.

Alice gulps as the Hatter stalks toward her. With each step, a small measure of his barely-leashed fury fizzles out of him. His eyes are nearly verdantly green again when he comes to a halt in front of her. Wordlessly, he offers her the claymore. She accepts it from his warm hand and clutches it in both of hers. Her grip tightens on the pommel as he hunches down and, with his thumb and forefinger, gently nudges Alice’s chin up.

Perhaps it’s her imagination that she can feel his breath on her neck and cheek. She blinks up at the ceiling of the room, his thumb now under her chin, supporting rather than directing. She feels a tickle of irregular pressure through the thick, too-tight leather of the collar; she hears the grinding of gears and a soft, brassy click! and then—!
The Hatter’s fingertips softly caress her jaw – deliberately! – as he reaches for the collar. She winces as the thing is carefully peeled off of her sweaty, raw skin and then breathes a sigh of relief when it is lifted away completely.

Alice lowers her chin, but the Hatter’s firm touch stops her. “Nunz,” he growls, examining the state of her neck.

“It’s nothing,” she hurries to reassure him. Although she doesn’t want his touch to abandon her, misrepresenting her injury would not be a very responsible thing to do. Unfortunately.

“I shoul’ make tha’ creature wear ‘er auwn bludy yoke,” he snarls on a breath.

Alice grips the sword tighter and fights a shiver.

Seeing this, the Hatter merely tosses the blasted thing aside and reaches for a handkerchief. “Twill b’ cold ou’ side,” he explains, wrapping it carefully around her throat.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Are we ready to go now?”

He nods.

“Go?” Iracebeth shrieks, ignoring Hamish and marching forward in her lingerie. “You’re not going anywhere! STAYNE!!”

The Hatter snorts out a dark chuckle. “I don’ think he can hear ye.”

Iracebeth’s face twitches with panic. “STAYNE!”

Briefly, Alice closes her eyes, imagining herself in this woman’s place. Stayne had been a waste of a man, but Iracebeth had loved him; she had believed in him. Over the course of the day, Alice had learned at least this much. She can’t let Iracebeth discover her king’s death the hard way. She just… can’t.

“He fell from the battlements,” Alice tells her gently.

“What?” she demands in a breathless voice.

“It was an accident—”

“Where is he?!” Iracebeth doesn’t wait for an answer to her own demand. She charges toward them. “STAYNE!!”

Hamish steps in front of her. Iracebeth, with her normal-sized head, is a very small woman, but she manages to shove Hamish out of her way. The Hatter scrambles for possession of his sword. Alice relinquishes it to him with numb fingers and a premonition of regret.

Before the woman can throw herself upon them or skewer herself on the claymore, Hamish grabs her around the waist and bodily tosses her aside. She crashes into the balcony doors which fly open under the impact. The wind screams into the room, much as Stayne had screamed during his fall. Perhaps Iracebeth had told herself that she’d heard only the wind, not her lover plunging to his death.

“You killed him?!” she screams, getting to her feet and lunging toward Hamish, her fingers curled into claws.

Hamish twitches with panic. The gun goes off and the bullet smashes into the ramparts on the
balcony. Iracebeth reaches for the gun in hands. Alice lurches forward, intent on assisting. With that manic, mad strength, Iracebeth could very well pull Hamish over the side of the tower wall!

Beside her, the Hatter seems to have realized the same thing. His longer legs carry him a half a step further than her. They are a mere moment away from Hamish and then—!

The gun flies out of his grasp and tumbles out of sight into the ravine below. Hamish then very smartly draws back his right hand and strikes Iracebeth across the face with his open palm.

“Calm yourself, madam!” he orders in a frightened screech.

Iracebeth staggers back a step, blinking with shock. Slowly, she lifts one hand to her stinging cheek. “Stayne is dead?” she whispers brokenly, tears filling her eyes.

“Aye,” the Hatter replies. Before their eyes, the woman collapses to her knees upon the balcony. The wind whips her long red hair but she doesn’t seem to notice. Nor does she seem to be aware of the fact that she is barely dressed. Alice considers reaching out to the woman, perhaps throwing a cloak over her shuddering shoulders.

She glances at Hamish who seems to share the same inclination if his doubt-filled expression is anything to go by. The Hatter, however, manages to put things back into perspective. “She collared Alice.”

Hamish blinks and straightens, a vengeful light entering his eyes. “Indeed. Let’s be on our way.”

Alice glances back once as they cross the room toward the door. Iracebeth still sits, sobbing on the cold stones. The Hatter ushers Alice into the stairwell and Hamish closes the door behind them. Soundly.

There is no more mention of their escape, but there is no need. With a decisive nod, the Hatter merely resumes the lead.

Departing the tower is a simple process. At the second floor landing, Hamish places a hand on the Hatter’s shoulder, halting his charge down the steps. The two men exchange a glance and then the Hatter wordlessly hands over his top hat. Donning it, Hamish strides down the remaining flight of stairs and out into the open. Alice hears him speak to the guards briefly:

“I believe his Majesty requires your assistance, sirs.”

“Ar, do he?”

“Yes, he’s dropped something of importance from the top of the tower.” Say, himself? Alice muses morbidly. “The one who brings it back to him will be well rewarded.” With a grisly view. Alice winces.

Hamish’s invented announcement is all that’s required to get the wolf and vulture to scamper off, abandoning their posts.

Huddling in Hamish’s stylish jacket, Alice hunches into the warmth and solidness of the Hatter’s body as they hurry from the Tower of the Black King and out into the cold night.

*~*~*~*
As rescues go, Hamish decides he’s rather pleased with this one. Although, in retrospect, he admits they could have been better prepared for the journey back. The dozenth time Alice stumbles on the perfectly level woodland road, Hamish interrogates her until she confesses, “Well, I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast.”

“Breakfast at what o’clock?” he badgers.

“I don’t know,” Alice retorts curtly. “It was still dark outside.”

Hamish seconds the Hatter’s ominous silence as they both digest this piece of news.

Two steps later, Alice trips yet again over her own dusty feet. Before Hamish can decide if he ought to scoop her up and carry her, the Hatter pauses, hands Hamish his sword with a curt “Don’ ‘urt yerself” and then commands softly, “Climb on mae back, Alice.”

“No, I’m fine, truly. You’re just as hungry and tired as I am. Let’s just rest a bit and then—”

“Neither o’ us’ll be gettin’ a wink wi’ ye sae close t’ th’ Outlands,” the Hatter growls. In the gloom of the nighttime shadows, Hamish senses (rather than sees) the Hatter present his back to Alice and kneel down in the dirt. “Up ye gae, laddie.”

Clearly too exhausted to argue, Alice complies, wrapping her arms around the Hatter’s shoulders and permitting him to hook an arm beneath each of her knees.

Hamish tells himself it’s too dark for him to be sure that something so improper and undignified has occurred in his presence. The night does nothing to hide Alice’s breathed “Thank you” and then her soft snores which follow. The Hatter giggles quietly to himself. Hamish decides he’ll assume that Alice’s windblown hair is tickling the man. Yes, there can be no other acceptable reason for why that bloody madman is amused.

Their arrival in Whotchworks is particularly anticlimactic. Cordwain merely holds open the workshop door for them as they trudge inside. Eying Alice who is clearly fast asleep and possibly drooling on the Hatter’s jacket, the pot-bellied March hare says only, “Ar, th’ lass is due a rest.”

Hamish collapses on the nearest bench uninvited and uncaring of proper etiquette.

“I’ll be expectin’ a full report on yer mischief, sir,” Mally informs him and then rushes off to chaperone as the Hatter puts Alice to bed.

Intending to simply rest for a moment, Hamish leans his head into one hand, permits his gritty eyes to drift shut and then…

*Crash!*

Hamish startles awake to the frantic apologies of a twitterpated Hatter. He blinks blearily at the sunlight streaming in through the workshop’s grimy window and then pushes himself up off of the table upon which he’d been slumped. His back protests the previous night’s treatment and Hamish wonders (with a twinge of worry) why he isn’t in Hong Kong. He has traveled back to reality on a sneeze, through a door, while dozing, and a variety of other modes of similarly unpredictable transport.

For a moment, he is vitally concerned about the possibility of being *stuck* here—!
“It’s fine Hatter. Truly. The benches have seen far worse treatment than a topple or two. Here, just sit for a moment. I’d best wake Hamish.”

“Hamish is awake,” he announces himself, irked at his own late rising and unsettled by his unexpectedly long stay in Underland.

He hurriedly straightens his waistcoat, slides his arms into his jacket (which Alice clearly no longer requires) and steps out into the shop proper. The first person he sees is an exasperated-looking but well-rested Alice. The Hatter’s oversized, pink handkerchief is still wrapped around her neck, but he thinks he sees the hint of a bandage beneath it. That alone brings him some measure of peace with regards to Alice’s wellbeing.

Wondering who had assisted her with applying salve and wrappings, he glances from the overly hairy and alternately squinty and bug-eyed hare to the very twitchy and thoroughly twitterpated hatter seated upon a too-small stool before deciding that it must have been Mally who’d played nursemaid.

As Alice brushes past Hamish with a smirk and a “Good afternoon,” he gives the Hatter a thorough once-over. The fury-driven, unstoppable hero from the day before is long gone. Tarrant Hightopp now balances awkwardly on a hare-sized bench with his bare knees nearly level with his chin.

“Twitterpated again?” Hamish mutters behind a cough, averting his gaze.

The Hatter’s wide, green eyes narrow into a glare. “Still,” he corrects belligerently.

Mally concurs, “Aye, Alice’s safe so he’s got no reason teh fight it now.”

At the mention of fighting, the Hatter’s hands flutter over his kilt, no doubt checking that nothing unseemly has fallen out of it.

“So you told them the whole story,” Hamish concludes grumpily. “Couldn’t wait for me to wake up.”

The Hatter grins, showing off his tea-stained teeth. “Not to worry! Alice left a share of glory for you.”

“How delightful of—” The soft whoosh! of the workshop curtain interrupts him. He follows the Hatter’s uncomely gawping stare to Mally’s smug grin and then finally looks over his own shoulder. There Alice stands with arguably the finest pair of men’s boots Hamish has ever seen.

“Alice,” he manages around his shock, “did you make those?”

“I did,” she answers, smiling at the Hatter, her knobby-kneed customer. “Do you still think shoemaking is a waste of my time, Hamish?”

“Yes,” he replies, “but they are lovely.” Indeed, they’re so finely wrought that Hamish might have consented to wear them. They shine with a rich, chestnut hue and each part of the boot has been carefully seamed and stitched. In the leather itself, a pattern of dots and spirals and swirls had been carved and punched with painstaking determination. Within each line, Hamish glimpses the hint of a color which changes subtly, like the shimmer of a peacock’s tail.

Hamish glances in the Hatter’s direction to judge his reaction. The man is blatantly in awe of the craftsmanship and the woman who is responsible for it.

“Alice,” he lisps. “I cannot offer you their value…”
Alice laughs softly. “I make shoes, not money, sir. Here,” she says, setting the ankle-high boots before his mismatched, stockinged feet. “It’s all moot if they don’t suit you.”

“Aye, check the fit, ‘Atter!” Mally urges.

Cordwain hiccups expressively. Hamish notes that the creature looks on the verge of tears as he gazes at the masterpiece of footwear.

Slowly, the Hatter leans forward and inserts first one foot and then the other into the boots as Alice braces them in place with her hands. For a long moment, he merely stares at his own shod feet.

“It hasn’t been a fortnight,” he remarks suddenly.

Alice smiles. “I finished them a bit ahead of schedule.” She then stands and holds out her hands to him.

After a brief hesitation, he clutches her fingers and allows her to lever him upright.

“They’ll be stiff at first,” she warns him, “but turn a few paces to check the fit.”

Hamish, along with the others, watches in silence as the Hatter walks two steps toward the display shelves of sample shoes and then pivots and paces hurriedly toward the open door of the shop. On the threshold, he stops abruptly. The man lets out a breath so deep that it must have been buried in his very soul. He reaches out and braces himself with a single, battered hand against the doorjamb.

“Hatter?” Alice asks, concerned. “Are they too narrow in the toe? Do they pinch?”

Mute, he shakes his head vigorously.

“They rub unpleasantly on your heel, don’t they?” she guesses, approaching his silhouetted form. “I can make some adjustments if you’ll just tell me—”

“Nay,” the man chokes out, turning and slowly, deliberately, reverently taking her hands in his. He faces her there in the doorway and Hamish is startled to see a single tear glistening on his lashes in the afternoon light. “Alice—”

Hamish studies the pair standing on the threshold, hands clasped and yet there’s not a single shudder of twitterpation in sight. Frowning, he wonders what had happened just now to banish the man’s nervous air and terminal clumsiness.

“They’re the finest— Ye’re the finest… I don’t—”

Hamish listens to the man flounder for words and choke on his own emotion. Well, perhaps the twitterpation hasn’t passed entirely…

Just then, just as Alice’s grin becomes luminous and the tear balanced on the Hatter’s lashes tumbles onto his cheek, just as Alice reaches up to wipe the moisture away with her fingertips, an ungodly screech whistles through the village.

“Th’ train!” Mally squeaks.

“Yah’ll b’late!” Cordwain grunts, shoving a covered basket at Hamish and then pulling him by the hem of his jacket toward the door.
“The train?” he repeats dumbly.

“Ar, yah think reports deliver themselves teh th’ White Queen? Off yah go!”

It’s then that Hamish notices Alice’s clean tunic and breeches… and the absence of her ever-present pinafore.

“We’re going to pay Mirana a visit today? I mean, her Majesty?” he blunders.

Alice gives him a knowing grin. “Only if we manage to catch the train.” She then snatches the basket from Hamish’s grasp and dashes off for the platform. “Last one aboard gets the bread crust!” she hollers over her shoulder.

Hamish shares a glance with the Hatter. Well, with an ultimatum like that…!

Hamish takes off as the Hatter wastes a moment reaching around the open door for his claymore. There’s no reason for Hamish not to win this footrace, not with the Hatter’s new shoes and sword for handicaps. His stomach growls in anticipation of lunch even as it tightens with tension.

He’ll be seeing the White Queen once more. That in and of itself is motivation enough for catching the Underland Express.
Chapter 14

Interestingly enough, Cordwain had kept the crust for himself. Or, at least, that’s what Alice assumes. When she’d sat down in her chosen compartment aboard the Underland Express and investigated the contents of the basket, there had been only perfectly edible and even scrumptious offerings within. She hadn’t mentioned this to the Hatter or Hamish. Not right away. It had been far too amusing to let them try to elbow past each other only to get momentarily wedged in the doorway, side by side.

Only then had she, laughingly, confessed to a lack of crusts.

Hamish had sniffed and called her cruel.

The Hatter had glanced at Hamish, giggled, and asked if there was any butter.

They’d eaten lunch amicably enough despite the Hatter’s attempts to correct Hamish’s bread-and-butter manners.

Citing an interest in finding the washroom, Alice excuses herself from the cleanup and dashes as quickly and quietly as she can down the train car. Reaching the end, she lets herself out onto the caboose’s rear platform and steps away from the glass window in the door. The engine huffs and puffs and wheezes a half dozen cars behind her and the warm spring wind whips at her hair, trying to pull it from its simple ponytail.

She leaves it to it – wishes the Wind luck, even – and then she pulls a badly wrinkled letter from her tunic pocket. Alice turns the unmarked envelope over in her hands, wondering if she really ought to open it. Hamish had told her it was hers, after all. At least, she’s reasonably certain this is the letter he’d nearly given her on the path to the Grampus Bluffs.

Frowning, Alice remembers how Hamish hadn’t been in any hurry to deliver it to her. He’d even referred to it as evidence in favor of abandoning her foolish affection for the Hatter. What could Hamish have possibly read to convince him that Alice’s feelings are irrelevant?

Perhaps she should have left the letter in his jacket pocket when she’d returned the garment to him just this morning as he’d slept. Perhaps she should have laid the jacket upon the bench next to him and ignored the telltale crinkle of parchment being folded. Perhaps she shouldn’t have snitched the letter, but she had.

Because she simply has to know.

Besides, what could be so bad? Especially considering how moved the Hatter had been by his new shoes? Why, he’d looked as if he’d been given something far more precious than a pair of handcrafted boots. And, oddly enough, his twitterpation seems to have been miraculously cured.

She closes her eyes and lists all the evidence in favor of the Hatter’s growing regard for her: he’d
come for her in the Outlands, insisted on freeing her from that blasted collar, offered his own handkerchief to keep the wind from burning her raw skin, carried her on his back when her body had simply been too exhausted to go on. She thinks she remembers another lingering caress upon her face as he’d laid her down upon her trundle bed…

Yes, the Hatter cares for her very deeply. Surely, whatever he’d written in this letter cannot undo that. Surely, Hamish had misunderstood or simply assumed something he oughtn’t have.

Taking a deep breath, Alice opens her eyes, unfolds the letter, and reads.

My dear Alice,

I’m writing with regards to several things which concern you but must not concern me. I am speaking of the hitch in your breath, the sparkle in your eyes, the faith in your smile, and the hope that shines from your very being. Love is perhaps the most beautiful costume you have donned thus far although I shall always be partial to the smallest blue dress. I wonder whatever became of it? Never mind; I shall be pleased to make you another, in your right, proper Alice size, of course.

Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes. Love. As your benefactor in Underland, I fully encourage you to love whomsoever you deem a worthy recipient, but you must know that such a man can never be me, a man whose heart has long been broken and left in ill repair. It was blackened by the Jabberwock, shattered by chaos, and scattered by silence. My clan is gone and my heart is broken. A broken heart cannot beat, not to conduct the blood through the body nor to sing in the presence of a beloved. There is no beloved for me, not broken as I am. It is with deep regret that I cannot love you, Alice. It is simply impossible. I trust you understand.

Love is as fickle as it is beautiful. I have no doubt that it will come to you again and that, when it does, the object of your affections will return so precious a gift to you. You will be adored one day, Alice, but not by me. I await the day when our family will include your chosen one and your children. Would I be an uncle or a grandfather to them, I wonder? Well, I suppose that matter shall sort itself out in due course.

You are my family, Alice. I will always do right by you, that I swear. But please do not ask for more. Please do not hope for that which I cannot give.

I remain ever yours in kinship,

Tarrant Hightopp

For a long moment, Alice merely stares at the letter clutched in her hands. The wind grabs at it, and if she would only loosen her grasp, it would be snatched away. She is tempted to do that very thing. She wishes for nothing more than to let this horribly careful and gently worded letter flutter away as if it had never been.

“I was wrong,” she whispers. “This changes everything.”

Clutching the parchment in her grasp even tighter, she closes her eyes but cannot hold back the tears.

She recalls the Hatter’s reaction to finding her atop the Black King’s Tower and his gentleness when he’d wrapped her neck, the kiss he’d pressed to her temple, and the way he’d carried her
back to Whotchworks: as a father cares for his injured child.

The vision she’d experienced last fall in the White Queen’s carriage, the future she had imagined as they’d rolled and clattered down the road to Marmoreal, sears her through and through. Unbidden, the Hatter once again giggles as his son and daughters tickle and tease him, clinging to his bandaged fingers and dusty knees. In her mind, the image changes as the children – her and the Hatter’s children! – disappear, one by one, until only the Hatter is left… and then he, too, turns his back on her and fades away.

*~*~*~*

“Did you lose your way?” Hamish teases Alice when she returns to the compartment.

The Hatter looks up from contemplating his new shoes and grins with so much enthusiasm that his eyes seem to be pushed askew.

Alice tiredly resumes her seat with a self-depreciating chuckle. “Perhaps. I was being curious.”

“Curious,” Hamish harrumphs. “It’ll do you an ill turn one day.”

“Hm,” Alice says, biting her lip. “I don’t doubt it.”

Hamish studies her, noting her subdued air. Perhaps she’d been scolded by the conductor for poking her nose in the engine room?

Even as he watches, Alice seems to rally. Turning to the Hatter, she says brightly, “I’m glad you’re pleased with the shoes.”

“I’m pleased that I suit them! To think they might have been fitted on another fellow’s feet…”

Alice snorts out a very unladylike chuckle. “Silly, Hatter. You shouldn’t say such things. Those boots could only ever be for you.”

The man very nearly gasps with delight at that, but Hamish doubts Alice notices. She has already turned toward him and is midway through announcing a bit too brightly: “You’ll finally meet the White Queen, Hamish.”

“Oh, yes, well…” He’s utterly mortified to feel himself blush.

“He’s already met her!” the Hatter contributes with annoying cheer.

“When did this happen?” Alice pesters him.

Rather than let the Hatter mangle the telling of it, Hamish takes it upon himself to explain how he’d unexpectedly arrived in her Majesty’s tea room with gun in hand.

“Which I shall have to replace,” he mutters, thinking of the lost weapon. Well, he supposes it had served its purpose: distracting Stayne so that Alice could strike the man and the Hatter could trip him and the wind could finish the job by pushing him over the battlements.
“So, how did she seem to you?” Alice inquires, no doubt trying to be pleasant.

“I, well, she… rather… ah…” Hamish hears himself stutter stupidly.

Alice bites her lip to hold back her laughter. The Hatter has no such reservation. The man practically rolls in his seat. After that, Hamish clamps his lips shut and resolves to endure the trip in silence.

Alice ignores his petulance and asks the Hatter about people of their mutual acquaintance: a Thackery person, a collection of Tweedles, a Bayard, a Chessur—

Hamish narrows his eyes at the last name, certain that the Hatter had mentioned the latter not long ago, on the summit of the Outland mountain range when he’d instructed Hamish to don his hat.

The Hatter is still expounding on a purportedly amusing anecdote concerning Thackery, a spoon, the Tweedles, and invisible cat hair of all things when the train begins to slow. Alice is far too busy conversing in nonsensery to notice their imminent arrival and the Hatter is rather too engrossed with Alice herself. Hamish finds himself utterly alone and becoming increasingly discombobulated. His pulse races and his hands tremble.

He’ll be seeing the White Queen again shortly.

To distract himself from his own disquiet, Hamish straightens his collar, tugs at the hem of his waistcoat, fiddles with his cuffs and checks his trouser legs for unseemly dust and streaks.

“You look fine, Hamish,” Alice says suddenly, pausing Hamish in mid fidget.

“I… yes, thank you, Alice.”

She smiles reassuringly. Even the Hatter gives him an encouraging nod. It’s a pity, then, that Hamish does not feel reassured or encouraged at all. His mind fills with images of Mirana’s parting wave, her confident smile and gracefully arched brows. “We shall have to have tea when this is all over and done with, Sir Hamish…”

Tea. There is no reason whatsoever for so simple a social ritual to make his stomach cramp and his palms sweat.

The train lurches to a halt.

“Time to disembark,” the Hatter informs them. “It won’t do to keep a monarch waiting, even a white one.”

Alice stands and offers her hand to Hamish. “Would you mind?”

He ignores the Hatter’s reaction to this, whatever that might be. “You are hardly in need of assistance, Alice.” Truly, her recovery is awe-inspiring.

“Humor me,” she orders him with a wry smile.

It’s then that the penny drops and Hamish realizes what it is she’s attempting to do. Thankful beyond words that she would allow him to keep his pride – but of course this new Alice would! – he stands and places her hand upon the crook of his elbow. “If you will direct, I will steer,” he promises as if she is the one in need of a steadying presence and not him.

Surprisingly, Alice’s presence is a comfort. He manages to navigate the small hamlet of
Marmoreal and enter the white castle with a modicum of dignity. That dignity rather goes out the window when Mir—er, the White Queen sweeps gracefully into the grand reception room.

“Alice! Hatta!” she enthuses softly but with genuine pleasure. “It’s so good to see you both again! And, Alice, I am truly thankful you are all right.”

“Thank you, your Majesty. The Hatter and Hamish were instrumental in my escape.”

“Ah… Sir Hamish,” the queen sighs happily, unleashing the full power of her glorious attention upon him. “Congratulations on your success. You have my unending gratitude.”

“Uh-uh guh,” he hears himself say in reply.

The queen does not seem to mind his lack of coherence. She offers him her hand and he despairs over his cold, clammy fingers. Rather than repulse her with his touch, he places his shirt cuff beneath her hand and bows over it, brushing her knuckles briefly with his too dry lips.

Rather than looking appalled at his ad lib etiquette, the queen appears utterly thrilled. “What a charming custom!” she declares. “And so convenient,” she continues, pointedly keeping her hand on his arm. As the White Queen leads them forth, Alice gives Hamish a reassuring pat upon his shoulder, out of sight of the queen.

When this interview is over, Hamish decides, he will have to thank Alice. More than once, he feels the carpet beneath his feet bunch up as if to trip him, but Alice’s hand on his other arm anchors him and he makes it into the tea room without incident.

“Now,” the queen says, waving them to their respective seats, “I simply must hear of this valiant rescue!”

Hamish takes a fortifying breath as Alice inevitably moves away. He can do this. It is only tea. The White Queen is only the most magnificent and marvelous woman in existence. He tells himself to imagine he’s attending a board meeting at the company. The imagery does not do its job, however. Despite his chair remaining perfectly stationary, he nearly misses his seat and lands in a heap on the floor. If not for the Hatter’s timely intervention (a well-executed bump into Hamish’s chair on his way to his own seat), he would have!

“Your Majesty,” the Hatter begins, still standing. “I beg your indulgence. You see, Alice has given me a new pair of shoes.”

The White Queen glances down and studies them. “Oh, and they are spectacular!”

“I am ashamed to say that I haven’t properly thanked her for them. We had to run to catch the train, you see.”

“Hatter—” Alice attempts to interrupt.

The White Queen waves them off. “By all means! Perhaps you and Alice might prefer to take tea in the Royal Hat Workshop?” Hamish notes that the comment had been more of an assumption than an actual question.

“Your Majesty,” Alice tries – and fails – again.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” is the Hatter’s heartfelt reply. “Alice, if you are agreeable?”

She doesn’t look particularly agreeable, Hamish muses, but she smiles nonetheless. “That sounds… wonderful.”
The White Queen hums happily, “Do stop by later, dear Alice.”

“Of course.”

With a rather fatalistic throb of foreboding, Hamish watches her step toward the Hatter who, smiling, offers her his arm. She hesitates to take it. The pause is brief, but Hamish notices.

When the tea room doors close behind them, Hamish hears the White Queen say, “I wouldn’t worry, Sir Hamish. Clearly, Alice has answered the Hatter’s suit favorably. Everything will be fine.”

“His suit, your Majesty?” he inquires, turning around quickly in order to give her his attention properly.

“Oh, yes. Those shoes have very obviously been made with love. He knows her heart now, hence the twitterpation has subsided.”

Hamish clears his throat and unsticks his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “But his heart is still, er…”

“Broken,” the queen supplies softly. “Yes, but there is hope. All things can be mended, given the right application of care.”

“I admire your optimism,” he replies, pleased that he is no longer stuttering quite so badly. “I shall endeavor to share it.”

With that, he reaches for his napkin. With a flick of his wrist, he unfurls it—and knocks over his water glass which spills the sugar dish which, in turn, lands upon a teaspoon sending it flying through the air toward the White Queen. She dodges the projectile with a soft smile, letting it flip gracefully over her pale shoulder.

“Er…” Hamish manages. “I’m terrible. Terribly sorry, I mean. This is quite… I’m rather awkward around you, it seems, madam and… Well, normally I’m quite normal, you see. Er, your Majesty.”

She laughs softly and with delight. Hamish feels his heart warm at the sound of her mirth. “Truly, it’s quite flattering, Sir Hamish. Although, I believe I asked you to call me Mirana?” This she says with a look that couldn’t possibly be coy… could it?

Hamish swallows thickly. “Yes, yes, you did. My apologies… Mirana.”

“Much better,” she praises.

“And, in the spirit of continuing that improvement, might I make a suggestion?”

“Please,” she invites, tilting her chin in such a way that his gaze is inevitably drawn to the graceful line of her neck.

“Uh, perhaps, if Mister Swims would consent to pour for us, I might spare your table linens – and myself – further indignities.”

With a teasing look, she muses, “How could something so sweet be an indignity?”

Some instinct deep within him makes Hamish suspect that the sweetness she speaks of has nothing to do with the spilled sugar upon the tablecloth.
“But, I concur with your suggestion, sir,” she continues before Hamish can sputter a reply. “Mister Swims, if you would pour the tea?”

“Certainly, your Majesty.”

Yet, even as the large fish complies with the request, the tension within Hamish does not relent. Contrariwise, it builds. The soft smiles and the knowing gaze of the queen do not help matters, either.

With a steadying breath, Hamish reaches for his own cup and accepts the fact that he has just embarked on a torturously, deliciously long tea time.

Chapter End Notes

+ “Normally, I’m quite normal” is one of my favorite lines from the movie “The Gods Must Be Crazy”.
All throughout the train ride, she had endeavored to strangle every single one of her romantic notions into nothing. It had helped to speak of friends, of anything other than herself or the Hatter or the events that have recently transpired. For a moment (as she’d more or less ordered Hamish to escort her to the castle), she’d actually believed that she could do this. *It’s only for a day,* she’d counseled herself. Just one more day with the Hatter and then they would part ways again and she would be able to stop pretending to breathe properly and let out the sobs crowded so tightly together within her chest.

She’d been sure she could manage afternoon tea with the queen. She’d even looked forward to kicking Hamish under the table once or twice… but then the Hatter had interceded and closed off all avenues of merciful distraction.

“Here we are,” he announces brightly, opening the hat workshop door with a grand gesture.

Alice looks into the Hatter’s perfectly pale face. He has never once flushed that she can recall, never gained any lively color at all. But then, how can he if his heart is broken and incapable of stirring his blood?

It is true, then. She and he – they – have no hope whatsoever.

Suddenly, she knows she cannot do this; she cannot take tea with him as a friend. In her chest, her heart throbs painfully. Yes, perhaps it is better if she merely lays her cards upon the table, so to speak, and retreats to lick her wounds in relative peace.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, the Hatter breezes toward the hearth, merrily rhyming about silver pots, boiling water, and waxed peonies. Alice’s hand reaches into her pocket for the wind-crinkled letter that she hadn’t been able to let go on the caboose. She clutches it once again, hoping she’d merely misunderstood its message but knowing she hasn’t.

The Hatter is not for her.

“Tarrant Hightopp,” Alice whispers, pausing beside the worktable nearest to the door.

Kettle in hand and midway to the tea table, which looks as if it had been set and then hastily abandoned (perhaps when Hamish had arrived with news of Alice’s abduction), the Hatter comes to an abrupt halt. His eyes flicker this way and that as if calculating some great sum. Slowly, he sets the kettle down, pivots on the heels of his new shoes, and replies cautiously, “Alice Alishin?”

Alice studies his face, watching his brows twitch beneath his hat and the corners of his smile wobble with sudden uncertainty in response to her somber expression. In silence, she removes the envelope. She watches the Hatter’s green eyes dull as he tracks the movement of the letter in her hand as she places it upon the worktable. Alice says simply, “I read your letter.”

“Alice…” he chokes softly. He takes a step forward and then another. When he gets within arm’s length, Alice retreats, giving both him and herself a bit of necessary space.
“I found it in Hamish’s jacket pocket and… I am sorry,” she tells him. Alice tries to ignore the sight of his trembling hand as he reaches for it, but she cannot. She watches helplessly, her gaze dawn to his battered fingers as he brushes the surface of the paper once… twice... In that moment, everything becomes perfectly clear to her: she still wants those hands; she wants them touching her with such gentleness and reverence, just as they had in the tower the day before.

But it will never mean what she wishes it to.

Swallowing back all the hopes she has lost, she continues, “I understand now.”

She pauses but no other words come to her. Truly, could that be all that needs to be said? Perhaps. She knows naught about hearts like the Hatter’s – broken, shattered, ashen hearts, a heart that has been so completely mutilated that the man who holds it in his chest is made pale and incapable of love. This is not a Jabberwocky which she must slay. This is not a customer in need of shoeing. Alice does not know what to do.

She takes a deep breath and then, defeated, informs him, “I’m going home now.”

She turns toward the door.

“Ye luv me.”

The Hatter’s gruff accusation brings her up short.

Alice closes her eyes, willing her heart to be deaf, willing the pain to stay beyond reach just a bit longer, just until she’s back in her workshop in Whotchworks with her wily employer who will give her a plate of hot stew, and her spunky friend who will cheer her with rude limericks.

She challenges, “How would a man with a broken heart be able to know mine?”

The Hatter takes a step forward. “I feel it, Alice. Right down to my soles.”

Alice glances up as he rocks back on his heels, lifting the toes of his new boots. She stares at his feet as his words reverberate through her.

“Oh, God. She had made those boots for him with love. Cordwain had praised them, even: “A mahn’s lucky teh have anythin’ made with love…”

She’d crafted those shoes with love and the Hatter can feel it.

She has been caught, well and truly caught. There being no possibility of denial, Alice chooses to flee.

“Nay!” the Hatter hisses, leaping toward her and slamming the workshop door closed before she can reach it. “Nay,” he says again, his tone soft, low, and deeply mad. “I’ll no’ let ye leave me.”

Alice blinks, gapes, and then gets angry. “I fail to see how you can stop me, sir!”

He straightens, still blocking the exit, and explains as his green eyes shift past vermillion and into umber, “I’m bigger than ye, Alice.” With the quickness of a lightning strike, his hand darts out and clamps down on her forearm, avoiding the still-healing bruises on her wrist. “I’m heavier an’ stronger.”

She stares at him, shock robbing her of even her anger.

He leans closer. “I don’ wan’teh, bu’ I will figh’ for ye. I’ll figh’ ye if’n I mun.”
“Ridiculous,” she rallies. “You would never hurt me, not even in madness.” He had promised as much in his letter.

“Ye don’ understand,” he replies, his burning eyes seeking and searching, unnerving in their unblinking intensity. “I’m yer match, Alice. ‘Twas whot th’ twitterpation was showin’ us.”

Alice merely stares at him, her heart pounding in her throat.

“I’m yer match,” he repeats softly. “I cannae let ye leave me.”

“And yet you cannot love me,” she retorts, her fury slowing building and warming the chill that had begun to creep into her limbs. “Would you really be so cruel, Hatter? Would you?”

He seems to consider this. For a long moment, he says nothing. And then his mouth, set in a determined line, droops at the corners into a frown of regret. “If’n it meant keepin’ ye… aye, I would.”

Alice rears back, tugging her arm from his grasp. “Step away from the door.”

He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. He then slips the thimbles off of his fingertips and places them securely in one of his waistcoat pockets. All the while, his gaze remains fixed upon hers. “Alice,” he brogues thickly, “ye shall ha’e teh make me shift if’n ‘tis whot ye truly wan’.”

Her gaze drops from his eyes which burn from under the brim of his hat and fixes upon his hands which had just now dexterously stowed his thimbles for safe keeping. Her heart sinks as she acknowledges her undiminished desire for him. The vision of their future family is still a ghost in her mind, tormenting her with the very nature of their ephemeral quality and impossibility. Yes, she wants him, but she cannot have his love.

Really, she has no choice at all. Alice clenches her hands into fists and grits her teeth. Marshaling her determination, she heads for the door. “Move,” she orders him.

He doesn’t so much as twitch… until she places her hand on the door handle and pulls.

In the next instant, she’s struggling to catch her breath as the Hatter pushes her firmly up against the wall and crowds her there.

Oh, how she had wanted – wants! – him so close. Oh, how she had wanted – wants! – him to want her! But not like this.

“Stop!” she commands-orders-pleads, trying to wedge her arms between them so that she might gain some leverage.

He doesn’t relent, merely presses more insistently against her, trapping her, caging her. Thoroughly panicked now, Alice attacks the only way she can, the only way which will not destroy her own heart. “Would you twist my affections into hatred? Is that acceptable to you?”

Underland help her if it is. Underland help them both if there exists such darkness in him.

The Hatter blinks at her once, his eyes widening with shock. Their angry simmering abates with realization. At last, he seems to take note of the tears clumping Alice’s lashes and her struggles against him.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps, stepping back. “I… I am so very sorry, Alice.”
The words, while they allow some small, huddled, fragile hope within her to be kindled, are not enough to keep her here. Acknowledging the apology with an abrupt nod, Alice turns away and once again reaches for the door.

The Hatter lunges for her, his long, strong fingers wrapping tightly around her arm. Startled, she looks back at him, her ire rising.

“Don’ leave me,” he growls.

The angry words die on her tongue at the sight of his face, of his eyes which are still burning with desperate urgency but not with madness that is no longer beyond control. She does not ask him why. Not with words. She is incapable of words at the sight of him looming over her, heat rising from his body and his scent slipping into her mind and whispering seductively. She tilts her chin up, issues the challenge in silence.

He answers it. A fine tremor runs down his entire body, from the top of his hat to the soles of his shoes. “I need ye.”

“Do you?” she rasps. “You have refused my affection, ignored my friendship for months, and just now you actually assaulted me.”

He nods slowly, his eyes still shifting and simmering, his every muscle is still tense as if he expects to have to fight her physically… again. In response to her accusations, he reaches for her hand although he does not release his grip on her arm. He softly interlaces their fingers as he lifts her hand and presses the back of it to his chest.

“‘Tis true tha’ mae heart is broken. I need ye teh mend it f’r me.”

She studies his expression. Is that even possible? And could she really possess the means to mend his heart? Does she still want to? If he is not whole now, then what sort of man has she fallen in love with?

Don’t you want to know, Alice? Aren’t you curious?

Damn her endless curiosity, but she is. She does want to know him. She wants to see what sort of man lies beyond the façade of the Mad Hatter. She wants to meet Tarrant Hightopp.

But that doesn’t mean she’s going to make it easy for him. “You’ll have to give your heart to me before I can have any hope of repairing it.”

The breath he’d been holding escapes him in a soft whoosh. The tension evaporates from his shoulders and he sags, still clutching her hand as if he is alone in some very dark place and her touch is the only light in his world. Softly, he repeats the warnings in his letter, “There’s not much to be given. Jagged, charred, scattered pieces…”

Alice now holds her breath; they have arrived at the crux of the problem at last. She informs him with quiet strength, “You shall have to trust me. If you can.” And she will have to trust herself, trust that her skills will be sufficient to heal him.

But if she is somehow lacking…

The very thought terrifies her. She forcefully puts the thought out of her mind entirely. She will succeed because he needs her to. That is all there is to it.

His eyes drift closed. “I trust you, Alice,” he lisps. “If you will but lead me…” He opens his eyes and Alice feels herself swept away by the beautiful sea of green she sees in them. “I will
follow.” His fingers uncurl from her arm and he turns her hand so that her palm is now resting flat against his chest. “Lead me, Alice?”

She swallows thickly, robbed of breath by his plea.

“I’ll follow ye Above,” he offers. “I’ll follow ye teh yer home if’n—”

“Above?” she repeats, blinking once in confusion. “Why would I go Above?”

The Hatter hesitates. “Just nauw, when ye spake o’ goin’ home, were ye no’ speaking o’ yer home, Alice?”

Alice closes her eyes and sighs out a weak chuckle. Now his extreme reaction to her departure makes sense. It makes perfect sense. Especially considering all of the people this man has lost before. He’d thought she was intending to leave Underland! And given how easily Hamish seems to depart, why, returning Above might have been as simple as opening the workshop door. It’s no wonder he’d barred her exit rather than risk watching her disappear into thin air.

“In all honesty,” she replies, opening her eyes and meeting his gaze, “the thought never crossed my mind.”

“Sae, yer home woul’ be…?”

“Whotchworks.” She gives him a half smile. “Of course.”

“Och, sa’e me,” he murmurs on a prayer, lifting her hand and pressing his lips to her fingertips. “I’m sae sorry, Alice.” He repeats the whisper again and again until Alice takes the initiative. She slips her hand from his grasp and frames his face between her palms.

“Never do it again,” she tells him.

He nods slowly, watching her expression as her fingers move over his face, smoothing down his eyebrows, tracing the fine lines upon his pale and bloodless skin, brushing through the hair at the nape of his neck.

On a breath, the Hatter confesses, “It ne’er occurred teh me tha’ I’d wan’ mae heart teh b’ mended, bu’ I…” He swallows thickly. “I wan’ it, Alice. I wan’teh luv ye as ye deserve teh be.”

She wants that as well, but she can’t resist scolding him just a tiny bit: “A saganstitute man once told me that a thing is impossible only if you believe it is.”

“Alice,” he lisps, placing her hand once more upon his cheek and leaning into her touch with a sigh. “No matter how many voices there are, I always hear yours, and you call me back to myself. You help me remember the man I used to be. If I could be him again…”

“Hush,” she replies, hovering her other hand briefly over his lips. “Do not try to be him; simply be you.”

“With your assistance, Alice,” he vows.

“Which you have,” she replies solemnly.

The Hatter’s lips stretch into a tentative smile. Alice feels an answering grin tug at her own mouth. For a long moment, they merely share a smile between them and then…

And then something changes, something subtle but irreversible. The hue of his eyes deepens to a
shade of evergreen and his gaze moves undeniably to her lips, which part in helpless reaction to his sensual focus.

He whispers, breathes her name, as he leans toward her. Her heart pounds; her lashes flutter closed; her hand upon his chest clutches his jacket lapel. Part of her wants to refuse this kiss – he does not love her and she will love him more than she can bear if he bridges the distance between them but she doesn’t think she has the strength of will to refuse herself this—!

*Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!* 

She startles at the sound of someone pounding upon the workshop door. 

“Alice!” she hears Hamish call frantically through the wood.

Before she can recover the equilibrium needed to step away from Tarrant Hightopp, the door slams open and Hamish lurches across the threshold fairly shouting, “Don’t read that blasted lett —! …oh.”

Alice bites her lip in response to Hamish’s wide-eyed stare. The Hatter still holds her hand intimately against his chest. Given their close proximity which must clearly indicate that Hamish had barged in on a rather private moment, she isn’t surprised to feel herself blush.

“I, ah, already read it, Hamish,” she replies in a tone that is embarrassingly breathless.

“Read what?” He blinks at her owlishly. Alice has never seen him so out of sorts. Nor has she ever seen such an obvious stain on his waistcoat. Had he just spilled tea all over himself?

Clearing her throat, she clarifies, “The letter. The Hatter’s letter.”

“And you’re…? And he’s…? Ah, right. Well done, then.” For a moment, it seems as if Hamish will merely pivot smartly and retreat. He turns back toward the door but then some thought pulls him up short. “No. No, blast it!” Facing her and the Hatter once again, he declares, “No, I cannot in all good conscience leave you to it! Why, what would people say about you carrying on with a man who’s not even your fiancé!”

“Alice can speak for herself,” the Hatter points out somewhat unhelpfully.

Hamish makes an odd, growling sound.

“Calm down,” Alice orders him. “I don’t care what people will say! If I want to—to—”

Actually, Alice isn’t sure what she and the Hatter are doing… or about to do. Well, that sort of uncertainty is hardly going to get Hamish to mind his own business! And he most certainly *should* mind his own business: she’s a grown woman, fully capable of making her own decisions about her life! Alice casts about for an assertion of adequate panache. “If I want to *futterwhacken*, I will!”

Hamish blinks. “Futter whack?” he repeats slowly. “Is that the current euphemism?”

It belatedly occurs to Alice that her words had not come out the way she’d intended for them to be heard. Feeling heat rising in her face, Alice attempts nonetheless to make a full recovery, “It’s just *a dance!*” *Oh, botheration. That doesn’t sound much better.*

And, if Hamish’s silently raised brows are any indication, he doesn’t think so, either.

Still faced with only the barest of certainties – which is that she will stay in Underland and she will be with the Hatter *somewhere* – Alice strives to speak abstractly, “Um, I mean, we’re in this
That’s hardly an improvement, Alice! “—er, at this particular juncture—” Oh, damnation! Alice squeezes her eyes shut briefly in an effort to focus. “Er, in this stage of the proceedings… uh…”

The Hatter’s bandaged fingers move over the back of her hand in a caress that he’d probably intended to be supportive. Unfortunately, it only robs her mind of every single solitary thought it possesses. Including tactful attempts at abstraction.

*~*~*~*

“Marriage proposals aren’t necessary for this sort of thing!” Alice eventually blurts out and then promptly blushes so magnificently that Hamish fears she’s on the verge of an apoplexy.

Hamish can only hope that his own too-warm face is not as bright as hers. He wills her to simply shut up with every fiber of his being. In fact, he probably would have been carried away by the same wave of mortification which makes her close her eyes and sway on her feet with shame except Tarrant Hightopp’s expression catches Hamish’s eye.

The man’s wild and screamingly orange brows twitch together in response to some terrible thought or other. “Marriage, an un-necessity?” he whispers in a distraught tone. “But that would mean…!”

“That would mean,” Hamish hurriedly attempts to interject, saving the lot of them from expiring from sheer awkwardness, “that a man mustn’t rush things. Rather, in time, he will demonstrate his financial stability and contentious commitment toward so momentous an enterprise as family, hearth, and home. I am sure,” Hamish concludes with a pointed glare at the Hatter, “that although the customs may be different here that the spirit of the practice is identical.”

“Hamish, stop lecturing us,” Alice says, somewhat recovered from her mortification and her tone equally balanced with exasperation and amusement.

“I believe he was lecturing me,” the Hatter differs, grinning broadly.

Hamish doesn’t deny it. “Hm, yes, well. So long as we understand one another, Hightopp.”

“As well as we ever do,” the man replies with maddening vagueness.

Opening his mouth in order to share a smart retort to that, Hamish chokes instead when a familiar, feminine voice muses from the corridor, “Have you successfully located the contents of your jacket pocket, Sir Hamish?”

He turns and regards Mirana’s patient (and patently amused) smile. “Ug, um, yes. Quite.”

“Excellent!” The queen then gently places her hand upon Hamish’s arm, which twitches embarrassingly. Damn this sudden case of nerves in her presence! Whatever has come over him? If these bizarre seizures continue, he shall have to consult a physician!

“Ah, Alice, Hatter,” the queen sighs happily, seeing their still-joined hands, the Hatter’s
ceremonial dress, and Alice’s pristine tunic and breeches. “Will it be a handfasting, then? A wise choice. We mustn’t rush things where the heart is concerned.”

“A… a handfasting?” Alice sputters, staring at the queen and completely missing the *euphoric* expression on the Hatter’s face. For which Hamish is seriously considering throttling him.

“Oh, yes,” the queen continues. “The only way to build a home is from the ground up, as they say.”

Hamish opens his mouth to protest but, just then, the queen’s hand slides up and then under his arm in a sensual motion. She draws herself nearer to him until the edge of her bodice nearly brushes his elbow. His protestations scatter.

Alice seems immobilized with shock. Her eyes are still wide and expression blank as the Hatter gently nudges her chin up with his battered fingertips so that he can meet her gaze.

That task accomplished, he reaches for her hand again. “Will ye give me th’ gift o’ a year an’ a day wi’ ye?”

Her response seems to be a tiny, strangled squeak, muffled in the back of her throat.

The Hatter brushes his thumbs over her captured hands. “Will ye let me show ye tha’ I’m a gehd match f’r ye, Alice?”


“Once it’s healed, ‘twill b’ yers,” he swears.

Silence stretches in the hat workshop as Alice considers this. Hamish glances toward the hat stands, wishing even one were within reach so that he might pitch it at the Hatter and break the power that the blasted man seems to wield over Alice. Forcing himself to ignore Mirana’s luminous presence at his side, Hamish blurts, “Think carefully, Alice, please. Are you fully prepared for this sort of thing?”

“But that’s the beauty of it,” Mirana points out graciously. “Neither of them are. They must make a new path – a path for two – and such journeys are rarely undertaken with full preparation and foresight.” The White Queen turns toward Alice and the Hatter. “Alice, my former champion, do you understand that this will not be easy? However, if you accept, you will be guaranteed a year and a day to get it right.”

“And… at the end?” she asks brazenly.

Mirana doesn’t flinch at the delicate topic. “If there are no children, if the house is in disrepair and its occupants ambivalent, then no one will speak of the handfasting again. But I wouldn’t worry,” the queen continues, smiling wistfully, “twitterpation has never been wrong.”

Hamish draws in a breath, endeavoring to be the voice of reason in this mad kerfuffle.

“I accept,” Alice says softly but with confidence. She looks into the Hatter’s bright green eyes and repeats, “I accept a handfasting with you, Tarrant Hightopp.”

“I shall provide you with the best of which I am capable, Alice Alishin, for a year and a day… and longer if you permit it,” he vows, raising her hands to his lips and pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

At Hamish’s side, the queen produces a perfectly white handkerchief and dabs at her misty eyes.
Hamish, perhaps inappropriately, despairs at not having a freshly laundered and monogrammed square of linen to offer her. But, however!

Hardening his resolve, Hamish returns his attention to the utter mess Alice has just made of her life. A handfasting, indeed!

“I trust,” the Hatter continues in the same deliberately clear and well-enunciated tone, quirking a mangy brow in Hamish’s direction, “that this will satisfy the conditions you laid out in your lecture?”

Hamish swallows back an oath. How could things have backfired so badly? But then he recalls: this is Underland. Utter backwardness is rather the norm here.

“Alice?” Hamish tries one last time.

“I want this, Hamish,” she informs him with quiet confidence.

Blast! Well, that only leaves him one avenue left. He takes it:

“Hightopp, you will do right by her or, I swear by all that’s holy, I’ll hunt you down and—”

“Thank you, Hamish,” Alice speaks over him.

“And you,” he continues, “ought to have known better than to agree to… this.”

She arches her brows haughtily in answer to his challenge. “Says the man in denial of the fact that he’s all a-twitter.”

“I most certainly am—”

“Not ready to think about it,” Mirana smoothly interjects, rubbing his arm beneath her hand protectively. “Which is just as well. We haven’t finished our battenburg yet. Shall we, Sir Hamish?”

As she gestures toward the door, the handkerchief held in her pale hand flutters free from her grasp. Hamish reflexively and mindlessly dives for it as it tumbles beneath the Hatter’s worktable.

“Ah, here we are, Mirana,” he says, standing once again. He turns and blinks at the sight of his butler standing in the doorway to his room. Hamish startles.

The butler merely holds out his hat, walking stick, and raincoat. “Will you still be going out, sir?”

For a moment, Hamish chokes on a tangle of painful emotions in his chest. Just a moment ago, he’d been in Underland. Mirana had been leaning upon his arm, driving him to distraction. Alice had entered a virtue-compromising handfasting with Tarrant Hightopp. Just a moment ago, he’d had far more important things to deal with than meetings and traders’ work and other assorted business.

Hamish stares at the handkerchief in his hands for a long moment before he finds himself concluding that it had all really happened. He’d just spent the last day and a half (and not just an hour!) in Underland on a quest to rescue Alice… and, all the while, hardly more than a moment had passed here in his absence.

“Impossible,” he mutters, stunned.

Some part of him, however, which has begun to take on a few of Alice’s more unconventional
qualities, whispers cheekily that *nothing* is impossible… so long as you *believe*.

Perhaps, Hamish allows, he is ready to do that now. *Yes*, he decides, gently folding up the White Queen’s favor and placing it in his jacket breast pocket, *it is time to believe that Underland is, in fact, both real and utterly impossible.*
“Hamish!” Alice calls urgently. “Don’t reach for—!”

But she is already too late. The odd rippling pressure that she’d sensed gathering in the room reaches its apex and seems to splash in on itself, like a single drop of water being lifted from the surface of a puddle. In the next instant, Hamish is gone.

“I’m so sorry, your Majesty,” Alice tells the queen.

“It’s all right,” the woman replies with a sad but brave smile. “It is not his time yet. He isn’t ready and neither I nor Underland wish to rush him. Not to worry – he will be back.”

Alice manages an answering smile.

“Now,” the White Queen continues with a fortifying breath, “I believe you were about to take tea together?”

“Yes…” Alice replies and then glances beseechingly at the Hatter.

He gives her fingers a gentle squeeze and then turns toward the queen and invites, “We would be delighted if you would join us.”

Mirana smiles with more delight than sadness. “Thank you. I accept! Perhaps we can discuss how I can assist you both with this new, fantastic venture?”

The Hatter tends to the queen’s chair as Alice prepares another place setting. Once tea is poured and fresh edibles produced, the Hatter holds out Alice’s chair, which she takes, smiling up at him. He gently tweaks a lock of her hair in reply before seating himself.

“Cream and sugar, your Majesty?” he inquires, pouring for their guest and benefactress.

Teatime lasts until the dinner hour, Alice is surprised to discover. It turns out that there are quite a lot of decisions and preparations to be made at the onset of a handfasting.

“You’ll need a roof over your heads,” the queen muses gently. “Where would you like it to be built?”

Were there any other man sitting beside her at the moment, Alice fears she would have been horridly overwhelmed by such monumental concerns as the location of their new home. As it stands, she is only a little overwhelmed.

“But Cordwain…” she poses at one point. “I’m his apprentice and he… what shall I tell him?”

“Mae shoes werenae crafted by an apprentice, Alice,” the Hatter tells her softly.

The queen nods. “I imagine you can expect a visit from Whotchwork’s shoesmith in the near future so that he can congratulate you, Madam Shoemaker, on the mastery of your craft.”
“I… I’m a shoemaker? Truly?” she whispers, reaching for the Hatter’s arm and clutching his jacket sleeve.

“Aye,” he replies, leaning toward her and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Congratulations,” Mirana applauds.

Leaning back, the Hatter asks, “Shall we share our workshop space, Alice? Or would you prefer privacy?”

Yes, there are a great many decisions to be made.

The following afternoon – after dinner is finally eaten, more discussion is had, a sleepless night is endured (during which Alice is sure that the excitement and anticipation buzzing and humming beneath her skin will never subside), a hectic morning is spent packing and bidding farewells, a heartwarming and fortifying moment of clasped hands is shared between Alice and the Hatter and then a long walk along a rarely used wooded road is undertaken – Alice is finally sure that all the decisions she and the Hatter had made together are the right ones.

Iplam and its ruins greet them around the last bend in the road and a sense of peace steals over her. The Hatter’s hand reaches for and grasps hers tightly.

A sea of lush, green grass rolls before them. Here and there, Alice sees the scattered remains of the burnt village and she knows that’ll have to be dealt with eventually, but what commands Alice’s attention at the moment is the pale skeleton of a two-story house made of new wood which stands proudly beside a just-constructed well.

“When did the White Army do this?” she asks.

“Last night, I believe,” the Hatter replies. “Or perhaps I was the only one kept awake by all the activity?”

“The activity?” Alice echoes. “I didn’t hear anything.” She wouldn’t have been able to. Iplam is quite far from Marmoreal, after all.

“Nor I,” the Hatter replies, “but I felt very productive.”

Recalling the buzz which had kept her awake, Alice laughs. “Now that you mention it, so did I. I didn’t sleep a wink.”

The Hatter’s hand squeezes hers once more.

“Are we meant to finish it ourselves, then?”

“Yes,” he answers.

If not for the warm, rough hand clutching hers, the task would have been horrifyingly daunting.

“All right. What must be done first?”

“The roof over our heads, of course. Then we’ll tend to our daily bread.” With an encouraging smile, he pulls her toward the new house and they get to work.

The White Army had left all the supplies they would need in neat piles nearby, so it’s only a matter of assembling them into something resembling a home. That first day, the Hatter doffs his hat and jacket before hoisting himself up onto the roof beams. Alice hands him board after board, standing upon a ladder to help hold them in place as the Hatter hammers them down. It’s hard,
sweaty work, but by nightfall they have a roof over their heads.

“Have you ever done this before?” she asks once they’ve washed up with water from the well and settled down on a blanket with a simple meal of bread, cheese, and dried fruit between them.

His brows twitch expressively. “A handfasting?” he asks, somewhat startled.

Actually, Alice had been asking about building a house, but now that he mentions it… “Yes. Have you ever—?”

“Nay,” he answers simply.

Alice releases the breath she’d been holding. It shouldn’t have mattered one way or the other if he had, but she rather likes that he hasn’t.

“An’ yerself, Alice?” he inquires suddenly.

She gapes at him. “No. No, of course not. This isn’t how things are done Above.”

“Hauw are they done?” he asks with a curious tilt to his chin.

“Rather formally, I’m afraid,” she replies, fiddling with a dried strawberry in the palm of her hand. “First, both families must agree. Then the man asks the woman to be his wife, publically, and on bended knee. It’s very awkward.”

“And what of that?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Have you ever been asked on bended knee to be a wife?”

Alice hesitates. She briefly considers lying…

“Who was he?” the Hatter demands softly, urgently. Apparently, she’d hesitated just long enough to answer his question.

She sighs. “It was Hamish,” she replies with a rueful smile.

The Hatter blinks at her for a moment before throwing back his head and giggle-laugh-snorting vigorously.

“I know,” she replies on a chuckle. “I’m glad we talked our parents out of it.”

The Hatter calms and squints speculatively. “Was this one of the things that needed doing? Or a question which wanted answering?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Alice.”

“The pleasure was mine, Hatter.”

He frowns slightly. “Alice… I am not a hatter here, only myself. Whoever that man is.”

“Is his name still Tarrant Hightopp?”

“Aye,” he replies with a smile which is endearingly nervous. “Will ye use mae gi’en name?”
“Tarrant?” she checks after a moment of hesitation.

He sags with relief. “Aye.”

And then she returns to her original question: “Have you ever built a house before?”

“From roof to front door? No,” he replies honestly, passing Alice another piece of bread when she finishes the last of the bit in her hand. “But I’ve helped with the raising of the roof and the laying of the foundations before, for other handfasted couples.”

His gaze flickers away and out, past the unfinished walls, and seems to snag on one set of ruins after another. Wordlessly, Alice reaches for his hand. His fingers tighten around hers and, after a moment spent with his eyes squeezed shut, he opens them once more and smiles.

Alice doesn’t say she’s sorry she hadn’t killed the Jabberwocky sooner and Tarrant doesn’t apologize for his pain.

They spend the night sharing a thin pallet and a pair of blankets. In the morning, Alice awakes to find her head pillowed on his arm and his warmth cuddled against her back. Smiling, she closes her eyes and endeavors to savor the moment just a bit longer. When she wakes again, Tarrant is laying out their breakfast upon his blanket a few steps away.

“The oven today?” Alice asks after exchanging her shy “good morning” for his bright smile and assertion that it is, indeed, a very good morning.

“Yes, yes! We’ve mortar to mix and bricks to lay.”

That’s what they do… well, in between playfully dabbing bits of wet mortar on each other’s noses and cleaning them off again. The massive oven and its chimney are built by sunset. Alice’s arms are so tired and rubbery that she can barely manage to splash water on her face. Despite the fact that her hair is in need of a thorough washing, she ignores it. She’s simply too tired to bother with it.

Tarrant sees her braiding her dusty, dirty hair before bed and very tentatively offers, “Woul’ ye b’ wantin’ teh wash yer hair t’nigh’t?”

“It’s terribly filthy, I know,” she apologizes. “I just… can’t.”

He fidgets for a moment and then reaches for the end of her braid. Twirling it between his fingers, he offers, “I coul’…”

“Could what? Wash it for me?”

“Aye.”

For a long moment, she stares into his green eyes. His brows are slightly tense with anxiety, his lips slightly pursed with a burgeoning apology for the forward suggestion.

Alice lets out a long breath, trying to calm her racing heart. “All right.”

The sight of his answering grin alone is reward enough for forcing herself to stay awake. She takes down her braid as he fills the basin they’d used for mixing mortar with clean water. “‘Twill be cold,” he warns her as she sits down in the grass beside the small tub.

“I know,” she says. “It’s fine.”
And then Tarrant gently guides her head toward the surface of the water. Alice closes her eyes and, bracing herself on the rim of the basin, concentrates on the feel of his fingers moving through her tresses. They have no soap, but they have a few bags of sand. Tarrant uses a handful of this to scrub her hair beneath the surface of the water. With his arms around her and the heat from his chest against her shoulder and side, she can’t bring herself to mind the chill of the water at all.

He works quickly, thoroughly, and as gently as possible. He still inadvertently pulls her hair every once in a while, but she makes no protest.

“Last rinse,” he promises, gently pressing against her shoulders with his arm. He swirls her hair beneath the surface of the water, freeing it of sand as best he can, and then he lifts it from the basin and wrings it out.

She sits passively as he dries it with one of the towels they’d brought with them, one of several gifts from Mirana. (Along with a balm for the still-tender skin of her neck, which should be healed in three days’ time, according to the queen.)

Alice is nearly asleep when Tarrant rolls her into his arms and carries her into the unfinished house. The night breeze is not cold, but it still makes her shiver. She feels a solid warmth at her back and then a blanket being wrapped around her. Alice leans back against Tarrant’s chest and dozes as he brushes out her hair so that the breeze will dry it.

When she wakes the next morning, they are still sharing the same blanket, still fully dressed in their dusty clothes from the day before, and Tarrant’s warmth is still there against her back. His arms are still around her, one beneath her head and the other thrown over her waist. She feels his hand loosely fisted against her belly and sighs.

If he does not love her, he certainly acts as if he does. Perhaps that is enough, she muses.

It turns out, however, that it is not.

The following evening, after the east and west exterior walls have been hammered into place, Alice muses in front of the fire now burning in their kitchen hearth, her shoulder touching his, “You know, I never checked.”

“Checked what? We haven’t a coop or a front door to lock up yet.”

She pokes him in the ribs. “Your heart, silly.” Before he can object, she leans across his lap and presses her ear to his chest. She holds her breath and listens, but she hears nothing. “It’s true then,” she says, sitting back and looking him in the eye, “that your heart doesn’t beat.”

“No, not at present.”

She reaches up and gently caresses his pale, pale face, which never flushes no matter how much exertion he is under nor how warm the day gets. “All this time… ever since Horvendush Day, you’ve been as a dead man walking, haven’t you?”

He flinches in response to that question, but doesn’t move away from her.

She presses, “That’s why you gave yourself up to the Red Knights so readily and why you fought Stayne in the Castle of Crims even though it would expose your true motives to the queen.” And guarantee him a death sentence.

The Hatter lowers his head in defeat, conceding the point. “Yes, with no love in my future, there would never be a new family for me. To be damned to solitude… It was a relief to offer up my life.”
“And yet you did not give in. When Chessur offered to help you escape, you took it.”

“Because I wondered if you might still need me. I wanted, more than anything, to see you triumph and the Red Rule fall. Which you accomplished most spectacularly,” he concludes with a bright smile. His expression then shifts into something which might be quiet awe. “But then, you did something utterly unexpected and even more momentous; when you stayed in Underland, you gave me a reason to continue, to try to rebuild what was left.”

She frowns in confusion, remembering his treatment of her and their many arguments. “But you considered me a child.”

“Yes,” he admits bluntly. “I wanted you to keep your innocence so that we – I – could pretend that the dark times had merely been a dream.”

Well, she can hardly fault him for that.

He sighs. “But when I saw you again after months apart, when I heard you laugh and noticed how your hands had become calloused and stained with craftswoman’s work… I couldn’t pretend any longer that you were not a grown woman and a full citizen of Underland. I couldn’t fight the twitterpation when it overtook me. Mayhap I didn’t want to. I wanted to make you laugh like Hamish had. I wanted you for myself. I wanted myself to be yours.”

Alice feels a thrill shiver and shimmer through her at his whispered confession.

“I was prepared to wait months for your affections. I was willing to re-earn them fairly. But then Cordwain interceded, played to my selfish desire.” He looks down at the floor and wiggles his feet, still shod in his new boots. “I feared that you would have no love left for me with which to make these shoes, but I equally feared that you would, for I knew that would change everything. Irrevocably.”

Alice considers that in silence for a moment, remembering and – at last – understanding. “When I said, that day on the train, that these shoes were meant for only you, you looked so—” She doesn’t have to say the words. She remembers his joy with perfect clarity. It had speared her like the twin of the Vorpal Sword. Knowing that he could feel such joy but not love, believing that he could not ever return her deep affection for him, she had nearly crumbled right there. “When I told you that—”

“I assumed you meant that your love would only ever be mine. Has that… changed, Alice?”

“No. No, it hasn’t.” Perhaps it can’t.

“Then,” he says on an exhalation of relief, “there is hope.”

“Hope?”

“For the future.”

“I don’t understand. Love is necessary for the future?”

“W-well…” For the first time since the twitterpation had abated, he wimbles awkwardly. “For a family, it is. Bairns cannae b’ made wi’out luv betwix their mam and fa.”

“You mean… making love?” Alice forces herself not to blush.

“Aye. Is it not the same Above?”
“No, it’s not the same. Perhaps the act itself is, but love is not necessary for children to be conceived.”

“How very tragic,” he observes softly. Then, on a hesitant whisper, says, “One day, Alice, if’n you’ll ha’e me an’ if’n ye still luv me… If’n ye get wi’ child…” It will be because he loves her in return.

“That is why we’re handfasting?” she asks, clasping her hands together in her lap to still their trembling. “You have a year and a day to love me back?”

“Aye, to prove my love for you, to prove that I can be a good partner and a father, that I can give you children.” Which he won’t be able to do if he doesn’t love her.

Truly, Underland and its ways never cease to amaze her. “Things are very different here,” she whispers after a long, silent minute.

Tarrant tenses further. She glances up at his fretful expression and places a hand on his arm.

“I don’t mean different in a bad way,” Alice explains.

He swallows visibly and audibly. “Sae, ye’ve nae regrets abou’ auwr handfasting?”

“No, I don’t,” she replies. She leans forward to press a kiss to his cheek. Her lips are nearly upon their target when it occurs to her that this very action had resulted in heartache just half a year ago. In the White Queen’s ballroom, she’d rather embarrassingly mashed their mouths together when she’d dared little more than a quick peck upon his cheek. In her chest, her heart hiccups with dread.

And then it happens again: he turns toward her suddenly and their mouths meet awkwardly, but she doesn’t lean away. She can’t. Tarrant’s hand is suddenly tangled in the hair at the nape of her neck, holding her in place. His mouth moves overs hers softly and without urgency, turning the pressure of lips against lips into a proper and undeniable kiss. His eyes are little more than glittering slivers of green between his thick lashes. The touch is brief, but it rocks Alice to her core.

He leans back, still holding her up with the hand at the base of her skull. He studies her expression, but for what Alice can’t be sure. She ducks her head and leans forward, pressing her ear to his chest once again and listens. Tarrant holds her close and rocks her gently when, upon hearing naught but silence from his heart, she cries.

*~*~*~*~*

Hamish’s first order of business, when time allows, is the procurement of a new firearm. Such weapons are an unfortunate necessity of both sea travel and life in wily, bustling, opportunistic port towns like this one. Unfortunately, his revolver had not been returned to Victoria City, Hong Kong with him when he’d reappeared in his bedroom. He’d checked his pockets and looked under his bed but had found no sign of the weapon at all. Only the wooden box in which he’d kept it in his bureau drawer remains as proof of it having ever existed in the first place. He’s
disappointed that he’d lost the gun; his father had given it to him on the eve of his departure to China. He imagines explaining the fate of the thing:

“I lost it in a struggle while rescuing Alice from a fantastical tower ruled by maniacal villains.”

He can also imagine his father’s heartfelt and approving chuckle.

Hamish shakes his head ruefully, manfully containing his frustration. His father would commend his robust imagination, yet Hamish is certain that he’d imagined none of it. Even the tea stain upon his waistcoat had lingered as further evidence of his foray into Underland and of his meeting with its queen.

He raises a hand to his jacket breast pocket in which her monogramed handkerchief is always kept and swallows a sigh. Blast it, he misses her. And he rather wishes he’d had the chance to try the battenburg; she’d confessed that she’d baked it herself.

“Quite the accomplishment,” she’d explained with a teasing smile, “considering how Thackery feels about intruders in his kitchen.”

Well, perhaps he’ll find himself in Underland once again very soon. Why, perhaps the next time he opens a door or ties his shoelaces or turns the corner, he’ll be in her tea room again. The thought makes him smile and warms his heart so that he does not mope about like a pining hatter in his residence.

On his first holiday since his abrupt return to Hong Kong, Hamish departs his rented house early, intending to make it to the shops just as they open. He arrives at Victoria City’s dry goods and arms emporium just as the proprietor opens the door to the street.

“Good morning, sir. How can I be of assistance?”

“I’d like to purchase a handgun,” Hamish announces.

“Certainly. Have you a preferred design?”

Considering that, Hamish admits, “I’ve only ever handled one, which was a gift—”

“Ah, so maybe it doesn’t suit you? I see, sir. Let us find you a more comfortable weapon.”

Sometime later, after the passing of several other morning customers and a few deliveries to the shop, Hamish signals the clerk and announces his final decision:

“The Hopkins & Allen.”

As the clerk prepares the necessary box of ammunition, another customer in the store remarks, “I also prefer the Hopkins over the Colt.”

Hamish turns toward the man and smiles. “Doctor Wellington, how are you, sir?”

“Very well, thank you, Lord Ascot. You seem to be in good spirits.”

“I am…” all things considered. Hamish shakes the doctor’s hand, recalling not only that the man had provided his disembarkation medical exam upon arrival in port, but that his office is not far from the house which Hamish is currently renting. Given the peace and quiet of the neighborhood, Hamish finds himself asking, “Although I am surprised that you’d have a preference, sir. Surely you haven’t found many occasions to use a handgun?”
“Oh, you’d be surprised how boisterous this town can get, especially for a doctor who must make house calls to the docks,” the man replies with a wry twitch of his greying brows and a glance over the rims of his spectacles.

“I see.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in joining a small group of Victoria’s professionals for a day of shooting?”

“Is there a shooting range nearby?” Hamish cannot recall ever hearing of such a facility.

“Mister Amesley, the assistant mayor – perhaps you’ve met? – has a cottage on the mountain where it’s quite safe. Shall I have an invitation sent round to you when we prepare for our next excursion?”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Hamish replies readily.

“Here you are, sir,” the clerk gently interjects, handing over the wrapped parcel. “Best of luck that you are never required to use it.”

Hamish thanks the clerk and nods farewell to the doctor. As he makes his way home with his purchase tucked under his arm, he marvels at his temerity. He has never been one for outdoor sports or even gentlemen’s gatherings, preferring his own company to most others, but it has been demonstrated to him recently that his skills with a handgun are blatantly lacking. He winces as he recalls how wide of the mark his shot at the top of the Black King’s tower had been. Of course, he hopes to never have to use a revolver again, but in light of the circumstances…

Well, really, it all boils down to one thing: while Hamish apparently has no say regarding his entrances to and exits from Underland, the matter of his marksmanship is one thing within his power to hone and control.
which has many generous friends and much progress

Chapter 17

Over the remainder of their first week together in Iplam, Alice and Tarrant manage to finish the walls of the house (both exterior and interior, as well as sawdust stuffing in between). They shingle the roof and install the shutters upon the glass-less windows. They put up the front and back doors and lay down the floor. It is at this point that their friends begin arriving in drips and drabs.

The first to make their way to Iplam are Mally and Cordwain.

“Yer a shoemaker, nauw,” the twitchy hare congratulates her with suspiciously bright bug-eyes. “Sae ye’ll b’ needin’ yer work wear and tinkerings.”

Alice accepts the sack of clothing and the leather satchel of tools from his hairy, shaky paws with a sniffle of her own.

“Mally,” Alice says turning to her loyal friend. “What will you do now? Will you make shoes, too?”

“Me? Naw. I don’ have th’ talent f’r that, but now tha’ I’m done lookin’ after yah, I can get back to work.”

“Work?”

“Aye! Keeping th’ White Queen’s army in line!”

After offering a thorough consultation on precisely what dimensions and features her future shoe workshop ought to have, Cordwain and Mally head back to Whotchworks later that same afternoon. Alice is sorry to see them go so soon, but thankful, too; she and Tarrant certainly don’t have any beds to offer them had they wanted to stay the night!

The next day, a great Barooooo! announces the arrival of Bayard and his family, who offer to assist her and Tarrant with putting in a garden.

“We use ours for burying bones,” one sandy-colored pup confides in Alice, “but momma says you’ll use yours for vegetables.” The young she-dog wrinkles her nose at the idea.

Alice chuckles. “Gardens accommodate a wide variety of uses,” she replies.

The dog barks once in laughter, “Innit the truth! Why, we hear the queen uses hers for aging buttered fingers!”

Alice makes a noncommittal sound in response to that, but reminds herself to ask Hamish about his notions regarding alchemy during his next visit. If she doesn’t, he may be in for a rather unpleasant surprise when the White Queen finally invents some reason to show off her brewing
skills.

It takes a bit of hunting and sniffing, but they manage to find several strawberry plants, turnips, spinach, asparagus, potatoes, and carrots growing wild beneath the uncropped grasses encroaching on previously planted fields. They even find a grape vine, a young apple tree, and collection of gooseberry bushes. It encourages Alice that the Jabberwocky’s flame hadn’t destroyed the seeds in the compost piles or the roots of cultivated plants.

With so many paws and claws working beside Alice and Tarrant’s hands, the plot is tilled and the surviving plants relocated to their small garden by sundown. She and Tarrant wave the hound family good-bye and then see about getting cleaned up for dinner.

“You really ought to replace these bandages,” Alice observes, reaching for the nearest of his dirt-covered hands and picking apart the knot which holds the strips of linen in place over his thumb.

“It’s fine, truly,” he protests. He gently attempts to pull his hand from her grasp, but Alice won’t be swayed. The soiled wrappings fall away and she gasps at the sight of the jagged, open cut upon his finger.

“When did this happen?” she demands, alarmed by the depth and breadth of the injury. She reaches for the steaming kettle (the one the White Queen had sent with the Hatter to Wotchworks just three weeks earlier and which Mally and Cordwain had brought to Iplam with them the day before) and pours hot water into their only mixing bowl. “Did you catch yourself on a root today?”

“No, Alice—”

“I hope it doesn’t become infected,” she frets, tucking wayward strands of hair behind her ears in order to have an unobstructed view. She then takes his hand in hers once more and applies a laundered rag soaked in hot water to the cut. As she cleans the dirt and grime from his thumb, however, she notices that the injury does not bleed. In fact, it does not even look new.

“There’s no need for urgency,” he whispers, attempting to tug his hand away once more.

Alice tightens her fingers around his wrist. “You got this cut a long time ago, didn’t you? And it never healed because your heart—”

He sighs and nods.

Stunned, Alice sinks down next to him on the edge of the raised hearth, still holding onto his arm.

“It’s repulsive, I know,” he whispers miserably.

“No—well, yes, a bit, but… doesn’t it hurt?” she presses the hot cloth once more against the gaping wound in his flesh.

“Nay,” he says, shaking his head. “Not since it happened.”

“Will it ever heal?” Her heart aches for the horrid, eternal wounds on his hands. She can only imagine what other ones remain concealed beneath his remaining bandages. “Once your heart is whole again…?”

“It will heal,” he replies, his gaze seeking hers, perhaps searching for understanding rather than pity in her expression.

Although Alice does not need another reason to repair his heart, she discovers that’s precisely
what she now has: she cannot let him continue on this way, wounded and broken, unchanging as if snubbed by Time itself.

She washes his hands and redresses his wounds. He lets her with no further protests; he lets her see how damaged he is, how daunting the task before them, how great the distance which they must cross.

“Tomorrow, shall we start on the stairs?” she asks, tugging the last knot taut.

“’Twill depend on auwr guests,” he reminds her with a wry grin, flexing his re-bandaged fingers.

That night, as they share the same uncomfortable pallet once more, Alice lies awake with her hand atop his where it rests upon her stomach, and stares up at the exposed rafters in their still-unfurnished and unfinished house. Tarrant is like this house, she realizes, and there is much work yet to be done.

She wakes when Tarrant presses a kiss to her temple and whispers on a giggle, “Time to wake up, Alice. We’ve got Tweedles.”

She groans. “You make them sound like garden pests.”

He snorts, his breath puffing against the shell of her ear. “I’ll tell them you said so!”

“Oh no you won’t!” she cries, grabbing for him when he moves to stand. He topples back to the pallet on a squeak and that’s how Tweedledum and Tweedledee find them when they poke their heads around the open front door.

“Came at a bad time, we did,” one of them muses, hurriedly stepping back.

His brother leans a bit further into the room and waves to Alice. From underneath Tarrant’s arm, she waves back. “Looks to be a good time for Alice and the Hatter!” he argues.

It turns out that Alice is very glad for their help. The stairs are assembled in no time. Well, once Alice untangles herself from a still-giggling Tarrant, that is.

The following morning, just as Alice is helping Tarrant groom his unruly eyebrows, more guests pop in.

“A mirror and a comb would also suffice,” a droll voice observes.

Alice smiles up at the disembodied cat head rolling slowly above them. “Yes, but then I’d feel rather left out. How are you Chess?”

“Fairly important today,” he purrs.

“Oh? That’s a welcome change for you, is it?” Tarrant retorts.

“Change is coming, Tarrant,” the cat replies smoothly. “Whether you’re ready for him or not.” He then disappears with a soft poof!

Alice huffs out a sigh. “Blast. I guess we’d better get up and see what that’s about.”

She steps out onto the front porch of the bare-and-barely-assembled house, hand in hand with Tarrant.

“Ah! Good morning!” the White Queen sings up at them from the midst of a well-ordered but busy assortment of white soldiers. Upon a nearby tree stump stands Mally, proudly showing off
her army uniform while directing the company with various waves of her tiny sword.

“Right yah lot,” Mally announces. “They’re awake so hop to it!”

“What are they hopping to?” Alice asks. “Oh, and good morning to you, your Majesty.”

“Furniture delivery,” the White Queen replies just as four soldiers charge up the porch steps with a dining room table held between them.

Tarrant twirls Alice out of their way smoothly. “That’s very kind of you, your Majesty,” he answers for both of them. “But I’m afraid we haven’t finished the floor upstairs yet—”

Mally snaps her fingers at a group of soldiers who are in the midst of preparing a china cabinet for transport. “Oi, th’ four o’ yah! Pu’ that down an’ go finish the second floor.”

White soldiers swarm over the house. As Tarrant leads Alice down the steps, removing both of them from the main path of activity, Alice calls to the queen’s men, “Please remember to wipe your feet!”

She turns back to the White Queen just as Tarrant lisps, “This is wonderful, very thoughtful, but why…?”

“Oh, you’ve been working so hard,” their monarch replies, clasping her pale hands together. “And besides, the Bandersnatch wanted to see you, Alice.”

Alice follows the queen’s gesture to the edge of Iplam where the Bandersnatch is waiting beside a great wagon which he must have pulled here all the way from Marmoreal. She takes a step in his direction, grinning widely, and then Thackery suddenly appears from behind the queen’s voluminous skirts and swings a broken pocket watch in Alice’s face.

“No’ much time! Winter’s comin’! Go’teh stock th’ cellar!”

“But we don’t have a cellar!” Alice calls after him as he bounds off toward the house.

“I dare say you will by the end of the day today,” Nivens McTwisp informs her. “It’s good to see you again, Alice.”

“You as well! How have you be—”

“No time to talk! I’m terribly sorry, but Earwicket and I are on a schedule.” And with that, the officious white rabbit rushes off in the same direction as Thackery to, presumably, dig a cellar.

“Oh,” Alice muses belatedly to the White Queen. “Everyone’s so busy… What can we do to assist?”

Smiling, the White Queen floats across the grass-going-wild clearing and takes Alice’s other arm. “If you could distract a bored Bandersnatch, we’d be most appreciative.”

Alice laughs and allows the queen to gently nudge her and Tarrant toward the beast. The Bandersnatch nods his great head, rolls his huge eyes, and huffs impatiently.

“Would you care to stretch your belly and scratch your legs?” Tarrant asks the creature.

It sidles up next to Alice and nudges her with its furry elbow. “Oh, all right!” Alice agrees. “One ride.”
Tarrant helps her up onto the beast’s wide shoulders but he makes no move to climb up behind her. He pats the Bandersnatch’s side and brogues to it, “Ye take care wi’ this precious cargo, aye?”

Realizing that he means to give her a bit of time alone with her friend, Alice smiles at him, loving him more now than ever before for no other reason than his generosity of spirit.

“Wait,” she tells the Bandersnatch when the creature’s muscles tense in preparation of the first springing leap. “Is there room for one more?”

When the Bandersnatch readily shuffles in Tarrant’s direction and Alice holds out her hand to him, his smile widens until his green eyes seem to glow and his very being shine. Yes, the Bandersnatch is her friend, but she’ll miss Tarrant if he stays behind.

With the aid of the Bandersnatch’s well-placed elbow, Tarrant pulls himself up behind Alice.

“Hold onto your hat!” she tells him as he wraps a long arm around her waist.

And then they’re off.

The rolling gait of the Bandersnatch pushes Tarrant’s weight against her back, fits his hips to hers, and pushes her back against his chest with every loping stride. The ride itself isn’t long, but she’s quite breathless by the time the Bandersnatch decides to take a break beside a scenic waterfall—or perhaps it’s a water-rise. The current seems to be flowing backward and up rather than down…

As the beast lowers his head to take a drink, Tarrant reaffirms his grip around Alice’s waist and then—!

Her startled scream echoes embarrassingly loudly as they tumble off of the creature’s back and into a lush field. Tarrant snorts with laughter as they roll again and again until they at last come to a halt lying on their backs. Alice closes her eyes until the wave of dizziness passes and reaches blindly for his hand. She encounters his fingertips far sooner than she’d expected and sighs; he’d been reaching for her, too. Their fingers tangle together midway between them and Alice experiences a moment of potent and all-encompassing thankfulness.

“I love you, Tarrant,” she whispers, opening her eyes and letting the bright sunlight pull tears from her.

His fingers tighten in her grasp. “My heart is yours,” he replies.

Yes, she can believe that he has given it to her, now all she must do is mend it so that his hands may heal and his pallor fade. And once his heart is whole again, he’ll be able to say those three words back to her, word for word. Alice still doesn’t know how to make those necessary repairs, but she does not worry about that now. Now, she merely lies with Tarrant in the sunshine and holds his hand, glad that her task – while daunting – is possible, and doubly glad for her friends who are doing all they can to help her achieve it.

*~*~*~*
“Fantastic shot, Lord Ascot!” Mister Amesley (the assistant mayor of Victoria City) commends, still squinting at the remains of the target in the distance. “What maker is it you’re using, again?”


“They say the Colt is more powerful,” a man from the livestock exchange contributes.

The doctor isn’t swayed. “Well, for putting down a mad bull, yes, I suppose you’d want such a firearm, but neither Lord Ascot nor I are likely to encounter one of those on the streets.”

Hamish adds, “I prefer the accuracy of this one over my previous model. Should the occasion arise in which I must use it, I’d rather hit only that which I’m aiming for.”

“I’ll second that,” Mister Amesley says, accepting the doctor’s handgun to get the feel of it.

Hamish leaves them to their debate and removes himself to a nearby table. As he considers the gun in his hands, he smoothes a shiver at the memory of shooting a revolver in such close proximity to Alice and her Hatter. Dear God but if the action of the weapon had pulled it the opposite direction, he might have shot Alice! It truly frightens him now to think of that other gun in his grasp. He should not have taken it to Underland when he hadn’t been sure of his marksmanship.

But, that’s neither here nor there, he consoles himself. The gun is lost and he now has a much more reliable replacement. Now that he’s landed four of the five previous rounds in the cylinder, he’s confident that his aim is on-target. There’s no need to waste additional bullets. Perhaps he’ll come back here in the future to keep himself in good skill, but he’s done for the day.

Hamish takes his time cleaning the weapon and stowing it in its case. One by one, the other three gentlemen join him and the topic of conversation turns from firepower to politics. Hamish muses this particular shift in the discussion ought to unnerve him more than it does. He smiles ruefully. But, then again, is politics not the only true arena of battle that these men will ever see? Personally, Hamish can’t be bothered with any of it, not when he knows that there is so much more to the world than the price of silver and the textiles trade.

He idly wipes down the outside of the varnished gun case and allows himself to think of her – Mirana.

It’s been nearly two weeks since his previous visit and rudely sudden disappearance. Perhaps he’s due for another stumble into Underland soon? There is no way for him to know for sure, unfortunately. All Hamish can do is wait and continue putting one foot in front of the other.

And envy Alice, of course. Despite the monumental mistake of agreeing to a handfasting rather than insisting on a proper marriage, there’s no denying the fact that she is with the one she loves. She no longer has to endure the heartache of missing the man. Hamish, on the other hand, suspects that he will not be so fortunate with regards to the lady he cannot seem to evict from this thoughts.

Mirana...

“Lord Ascot, you’re rather quiet on the matter of the new tax policy.”

Hamish glances up and straightens his shoulders. “As you know, I’m new to Victoria,” he replies, “so I’ve little notion of the city’s revenue or public works.”
“Ah,” the doctor muses as he disassembles his own revolver. “Perhaps we shall have to remedy that. What do you gentlemen say to a game of mahjong at my residence this evening?”

Hamish isn’t too sure what this mahjong business is all about, but the others readily agree so Hamish also accepts the invitation. Perhaps he’ll enjoy himself. Or perhaps he’ll take a seat at the gaming table and find himself suddenly looking at a woman in white across a gleaming tea setting.

Chapter End Notes

+ I didn’t set out to write a Zombie!Hatter, but that’s kind of what he turned out to be. (Actually, Amaranthea talked to just_a_dram and I about writing a Zombie!Hatter story ages and ages ago. I’m not sure if that plot bunny is still stalking either wandermaranth or just_a_dram or not.) Anyway, in Heart and Sole, Tarrant can taste and feel, he just can’t love or heal. The healing thing is an extension of his broken heart: if the heart is broken, then it can’t pump blood. If it can’t pump blood then he’d be pale (and boy is he pale in Burton-verse!) and cuts and such wouldn’t bleed much. They also wouldn’t heal. Of course, this is all completely impossible, but in the often-times literal world of Carroll’s books, I think it could work. Sort of.

+ If the scene in the field with Alice and Tarrant lying down, holding hands seems familiar, that’s because it is. It’s taken from one of my 10 song drabbles here: http://manniness.livejournal.com/14844.html
Chapter 18

It’s brillig when Alice and Tarrant galumph back into Iplam, which is rather more developed than it had been a half dozen hours earlier.

“This is too much,” Alice breathes, gazing from the new barn to the bathing house, then from the outhouse to the aviary.

“Don’ fret,” Mally replies. “We left yahs lots o’ paint-work t’ do.”

“Still…” she begins to protest, but seeing the proud, accomplished grins on her friends’ faces, she cannot bring herself to be ungracious about their help. “Thank you.”

Thackery then lurches forward and, grabbing her hand, insists on giving her a tour of the new cellar. A fully stocked cellar, as it turns out. There are shelves of cheese, sacks of potatoes and turnips, a salted ham, a pound of butter, a pot of cooking lard, and even a barrel of wine.

“F’r special occasions!” the March hare shouts urgently.

Nivens then takes over, directing Alice and Tarrant to their furnished home. There are candles and candle-making supplies in the kitchen beside a butter churn. A dining table and four chairs sit opposite a long counter-topped line of cupboards. There’s a butcher’s block with knives, a pot rack with copper-bottomed pans, and even curtains on the windows. Blue ones, with yellow and orange polka-dots.

The pantry has been filled with spices, sugar, flour, oats, a tiny jar of olive oil, and a bag of salt. The cupboard under their staircase now holds linens, soap, a mop and bucket, a broom, and a peppermill of all things.

“For intruders,” the white rabbit explains briefly before continuing the tour.

By the time she and Tarrant are introduced to their new aviary (in which a pair of pigeons are already nesting happily), barn, bath house and outhouse, the queen’s army has been assembled, the Bandersnatch hitched to the empty wagon, and everyone is simply waiting for one last thing.

“Thank ye,” Tarrant says, grasping Alice’s hand very tightly. “We thank ye from th’ bottom o’ auwr hearts.”

“You are very welcome, my champions,” the queen replies and then, with an aimless wave of her hand, signals their departure.

“You’ll come visit us for tea, won’t you?” Alice asks the dormouse, hare, and rabbit.

“No’ wi’out an invitation!” Thackery replies rudely and then marches off.

Mally gives Alice a sly wink. “I’ll second tha’. An invitation, if yah don’ mind.”
Nivens concurs. “Yes, given what the Tweedles said about, well…” he hesitates awkwardly, his pink eyes moving expressively from Alice to Tarrant and then back again. Alice blushes as she remembers the wrestling match that the boys had discovered upon their arrival. Although, to be fair, Tarrant had warned her that they were no longer alone and she can imagine what it must have looked like to the boys…

“Right,” she replies. “Invitations it is, then.”

“I believe you’ll find all the necessary implements in your new writing desk,” Nivens further volunteers. “A fine evening to you both.”

“And to you,” Alice says with a smile.

“Fairfarren,” Tarrant adds.

And then they’re alone again. Alice takes a deep breath, wondering what she’s supposed to do now. She knows very little about handfasting customs in general and almost nothing about Underland’s version of it. Will Tarrant carry her across the threshold now as she’d heard once in a tale Above? And once inside their home, would he… or, rather, would they…?

Alice swallows, noticing that her throat is suddenly very dry. “Would you…?” she begins but makes the mistake of glancing at Tarrant who is watching her with those dark, evergreen eyes of his.

“Would I…?”

She clears her throat and tries again. “Would you like to wash up first? Then we’ll have the soup Thackery left for us on the stove?”

Slowly, he shakes his head. Alice watches as he reaches up to her windblown hair and gently wraps a messy lock around his bandaged forefinger. “Ye’ll need launger f’r yer tresses teh dry,” he replies softly and logically. “Ye go first, Alice.”

With a nod and a fortifying breath, she does. Alice takes her time bathing and washing her clothes. She hangs her laundered tunic and breeches up in the breezeway and dresses in a simple, Marmoreal-style gown which she’d located in the new armoire in her bedroom.

But no, it’s not her bedroom, is it? It’s their bedroom.

Alice gives Tarrant a slightly stiff smile when she enters the kitchen. She fidgets with the bath linen draped over her shoulders instead of attempting to further dry her still-damp hair. He says nothing and the silence yawns between them.

“Your turn,” she rasps, accepting her hairbrush from his hand and seating herself on the kitchen’s brick hearth to brush out her hair beside the glowing embers.

He hesitates to stand up from his seat at their new kitchen table, his gaze moving over her. She tries not to feel self-conscious. Perhaps it’s merely the dress which makes him study her so intently, as if seeing her for the first time.

Eventually, however, he does stand. He collects his own bundle of clean clothes from the seat of the neighboring chair and strides toward the door. But, before reaching it, he pauses and, this time, their gazes meet and lock. His pale, stained, battered fingers clutch the garments rolled up beneath his arm tightly.
For a long moment, he merely looks at her, and she at him. Perhaps he is also marveling at the sudden awkwardness which has sprung up between them now that they have no construction projects of significant importance to focus their energies upon. No, now they are in a house which has too many bedrooms for just the two of them. Will they now see about filling those rooms?

Her heart pounds and her hands tremble. Although she wants that – she wants him – she is still so unsure of the future. He hasn’t yet healed; she hasn’t yet figured out how to heal him. Yesterday, when there’d still been so much to do, she’d had time to discover the cure to his broken heart. Now, it feels as if Underland itself is holding its breath, staring at her in blatant expectation for her to get on with her task. But she still doesn’t know what to do!

“Here,” Alice says, as the moment stretches so taut she fears she might explode. “Take the candle.” She offers it to him with a hand that’s nearly steady. “It may be dark when you come back.”

Taking it from her grasp, Tarrant lets out a long breath that is almost a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Alice,” he lisps quietly. He gazes into her eyes for a moment more before he clears his throat and heads out the kitchen doorway and crosses the short distance to the bath house.

Alice retakes her seat, still feeling shaky and uncertain. For a long time, she brushes her hair in silence and in thought, in speculation and in anticipation of whatever may happen next. Perhaps they will simply paint the house tomorrow. Perhaps nothing has changed.

But it has. She doesn’t even try to deny it. Setting the brush aside, Alice wanders the house. First, she ascends the stairs – still uncarpeted – and surveys the new second floor. There are rooms here now – four of them! – and each contains a trundle bed, wash stand, chest of drawers, and an armoire, all delightfully unmatched. The rooms are bare and the beds unmade, but that is not the case downstairs. She pads back down the steps, passes through the entryway, and pauses in the parlor. She tries to admire the rug, the armchairs, the bookcases and writing desk, but her attention is irrevocably snagged by and fixed upon the master bedroom beyond.

She stands on the threshold for a long time, studying the eclectic assortment of furniture, none of which are exactly the same variety of wood nor constructed and carved in the same style. Ignoring her own reflection in the free-standing looking glass (for she doubts her own dazed expression will be a comfort to her), she steps forward and runs a hand over the pink-and-orange striped curtains on the window. Only then does she turn and regard the large bed with its goose down mattress, crisp linens, and cheerful quilt sitting commandingly and with flagrant pride at the center of the room.

Alice leans back against the wall, bracing one hand on the nearby window sill as she acknowledges that she will be sharing this bed with Tarrant tonight. Yes, they’ve slept side by side for nearly two weeks now, but that arrangement had been more like two kittens huddling together in a ramshackle crate for warmth. It had, in fact, reminded her of the night she’d spent taking shelter beneath Tarrant’s abandoned top hat. She can still remember how his scent had comforted her despite the hard ground and oversized blades of grass beneath her twice-Pishalvered body. Now that comfort is gone, changed.

Until this evening, she and he had been bound together by their shared poverty and the work ahead of them. Now that the work is mostly done, however…

Again, Alice thinks of his still-unbeating heart. Again, she despairs of how to repair it. The bed seems to call out to her, making Alice’s heart pound and her breath quicken…!

A sound outside alerts her to Tarrant’s imminent return. She quickly dashes from the bedroom and out onto the front porch. Clutching the railing – just hours ago carved, assembled, and sanded
with precision by dozens of soldiers’ hands – she listens to him moving about inside the house. The sun has long since set and Alice finds herself staring up at the full moon, wondering if she’s ready to go in there, to face him and the newness of their life together…

And then footsteps whisper toward her, over the threshold of the open front door and onto the planks of the porch. She turns slightly as Tarrant, clad in a clean shirt, trousers, waistcoat, and the boots she’d made for him with love, draws nearer and comes to a stop beside her.

“Alice,” he murmurs, “do you know why a raven is like a writing desk?”

She blinks at him for a moment before his words register properly, tugging at her memory. Recalling the last time they’d stood thus and pondered this riddle, a bubble of laughter erupts from her throat, carrying much of her tension with it. “Here we are again,” she acknowledges, still smiling. “On the eve of some great unknown.”

“In the light of the moon,” he contributes, answering her smile with one of his own.

She allows herself a moment to forget her tension and simply study him. His hair is still a little dark with dampness. She also notes the absence of his hat, which somehow seems significant. His expression shifts and his brows lift and fall.

Alice searches for something to say, but words cannot contain all that is swirling and churning within her. She wonders about his heart, wonders if he truly feels happy when he laughs and smiles. Surely his heart is in it, despite it being broken still. Perhaps they will not start their life together with mutual love, but joy…? Is that possible? And what if it isn’t? Does she even want to know if that is the case? Is it merely his faith in her as the one to whom he is perfectly matched which gives him the reason to continue with their handfasting?

All of these questions and more strain upon her tongue, do battle against her lips, but she cannot speak them. She says instead, “We have a writing desk… and perhaps one day we’ll have ravens, too. Would they nest beside the chimney, do you think?”

She glances at Tarrant when he inhales sharply. His expression is not one of pain, although she senses that her words have affected him strongly. “Alice,” he whispers, his fingers curling and uncurling again and again over the porch railing.

“What is it?” she asks as he restlessly sculpts the night air. “Are you all right?”

He doesn’t answer. Many moments pass before Tarrant takes a very deep breath and then turns to face her. She lets him gather her hands in his bandaged fingers and shifts to stand opposite him. For the first time, she is unsure of what to make of his expression.

His thumbs caress the backs of her hands and then, suddenly, he sinks down before her and kneels on bended knee.

Her heart leaps into her throat.

Tarrant looks up at her. Without his top hat, she can clearly see his eyes, which are quite wide, and feel the power of his gaze, which seeks and searches relentlessly.

“Alice,” he lisps, “I know naught of your world or its ways, but if you will… if you will stay with me always, I will be yours.”

His thumbs mover over her knuckles again and Alice glances at their joined hands. She stares blindly at the bandages on his fingers… and then she frowns. The bandage on his thumb appears to be darkening although it’s difficult to be sure in the moonlight…
“Alice,” he whispers, again drawing her attention back to his earnest, urgent, awed expression. “I’m askin’ ye, on bended knee, teh b’ mae—”

BANG!

Alice jerks. Her frown, which had fled only a moment earlier and been replaced by amazement at his words – “I’m asking ye, on bended knee” – now returns full force. A strange ache begins to throb in her chest. She shakes her head, feeling oddly muddled and confused, as if just waking up from a sound sleep.

“I’m sorry, Tarrant. Wh-what did you say?”

“Alice…” he rasps, horror widening his eyes and slackening his jaw.

She follows his gaze downward and blinks at a very strange sight. There appears to be a hole in her new dress, a hole and a dark, spreading stain upon her shoulder midway between the center of her chest and her arm. “I…” don’t understand…

Alice feels herself sway. She also feels Tarrant’s hands abandon hers to clutch her hips, steadying her. As she leans toward him, she looks up and out across the field of Iplam—

—and meets the utterly mad stare of Iracebeth of Crims.

The woman’s delighted giggle echoes in the windless silence, and then she lifts her arm. In her grasp, Alice recognizes a revolver. A single wisp of smoke dances from the end of the barrel in the moonlight.

Alice gasps, reaching protectively for her handfasted husband. “No… Tarrant—!”

As Alice’s knees buckle and her mind falls away into darkness, a second shot rings out and she knows no more.

*~*~*~*

Mahjong, Hamish decides, is not his game. He’d lost quite a few shillings to the good doctor and his associates.

With a sigh, he decides to chalk it up to an investment in the future; he’d learned quite a bit about the history of this port city, and he’d been educated far faster than appealing to the local printers for a copy of previous editions of the newspaper. In fact, he’d learned the city’s history prior to the opening of its printing press. Perhaps, one day, that will count for something.

On the front steps of the doctor’s house-cum-surgery, he bids Doctor Wellington and the others a good night before beginning the short walk back to his home. Behind him, he hears the livestock tradesman and the assistant mayor continue their argument on the value of the Mongolian yak.

It’s very dark tonight, but the moon is out and it is full, aiding him in his journey home. Beneath his left arm, he still carries the gun case. The gun itself, however, is in his right jacket pocket.
Although he does not expect to encounter any trouble, this is the first time Hamish has dared to walk the streets after nightfall. While this neighborhood is mostly safe, it is also one of the wealthiest and Victoria City is not so large that a sailor down on his luck cannot make the trip from the wharf on a quest for a gentleman’s silver.

As he passes the local tailor’s, the large shop window gleams in the moonlight. He glances idly toward its reflective surface. Through the sheen provided by the moon, he thinks he sees himself standing in an overgrown field, but that can’t be right. There should be a row of houses directly across the street behind him. Frowning, he glances over his shoulder—

—and blinks at the front porch of a newly built but as yet unpainted house. A movement at the top of the wooden stairs draws his gaze. Alice sways on her feet, her face paling as he watches.

“Alice?” he calls, but she doesn’t answer.

Her eyes roll back into her head and she slumps into Tarrant Hightopp’s arms. Hamish stares at the man, evaluates his kneeling form and frantic expression.

And then he hears the laughter.

Turning, he finds himself face to face with the woman from the Black King’s tower: Iracebeth. No longer dressed in only a kimono and bloomers, no longer grief-stricken or harmless, she stands a half dozen paces away with a gun that Hamish unfortunately recognizes aimed at his chest. A moment passes as he marvels that the revolver had not only survived its fall but been found and put to use once again. However, that is not a matter of importance. What is important is that he is clearly being targeted by a mad woman holding a loaded handgun. And if she’d hit Alice at this distance, then she’s unlikely to miss him.

“I’ve a little metal ball for you, too,” she informs him playfully, her painted lips stretching into a gruesome smile in the moonlight.

Hamish tenses, his mind going blank for one, eternal moment.

Iracebeth’s small, slender finger tightens around the trigger.

Nothing happens.

Her smile falters and then melts into a scowl. “No!” she hisses, fumbling for the hammer with her too-small hands.

Hamish scrambles for his jacket pocket and loaded revolver within it. He hears the telltale snap of the other gun’s hammer being cocked into place as he draws out his own weapon. He steps to the side, presenting a smaller target as he fluidly thumbs the hammer back with a practiced motion.

Iracebeth lifts the gun in her hands.

Hamish takes aim and—

\textbf{BANG!}

For a moment, the only thing Hamish hears are the desperate whispers of the Hatter calling Alice’s name again and again. The only thing he smells is burnt gunpowder. The only thing he sees is Iracebeth’s terrible smile.

And then she drops to her knees.
“No…” she breathes wetly. “Stayne…”

She blinks once and then falls back, still clutching the gun in both hands, finger still on the trigger. Hamish hurriedly approaches her from an angle and plucks the gun from her grasp with extreme care. Uncocking the hammer, he stares at the bullet wound in her chest. The woman herself is deathly still. She stares up at the moon, her lips now painted with a smear of blood.

Swallowing an oath – damn it all, he hadn’t wanted to kill her; he’d simply wanted to stop her! – Hamish scrambles to his feet and dashes up the porch steps to where Alice lies limply in the Hatter’s arms. One of the man’s hands is pressed tightly to her shoulder as if he can somehow push the lost blood back into her body.

“Hightopp!” Hamish barks, drawing the man’s wild, frantic gaze.

“Where’s mae Alice?” the man whispers.

Frightened now, Hamish reaches for Alice’s wrist and presses his fingers to her pulse. It still beats, but far too weakly. “She’s been shot. Is there a doctor nearby?”

The Hatter shakes his head. “We’ve a pair of pigeons, but they cannae work by moonlight.”

“Pigeons? What…? Never mind.” Hamish places a hand on the man’s shoulder and gives him a slight shake. “Listen to me, Hightopp. I need you to do something for Alice.”

“What? What can I do?” he brogues in a rush, his syllables getting tangled up together.

“Send her Above with me.”

The man’s arms tighten around her. “Nay—!”

“She needs medicine! When I stepped into Underland this time, I was not two minutes from a doctor’s surgery!”

“Yes, she’s your Alice,” he agrees in a moment of perfect clarity. How foolish he’d been to think (had it only been a fortnight ago?) that Alice would ever voluntarily leave this man, no matter the Hatter’s feelings for her! “She’ll always be your Alice, but you must let me help her.”

For a too-long moment, Hamish stares the man down before adding, “Please.”

The Hatter’s jaw muscles flex as he grits his teeth. “Promise me,” the man demands urgently, his bloody hand fisting in the stained fabric over Alice’s wound. “Promise me she’ll be all right.”

Hamish has no business making such a promise, but he does. “I swear it.” And then he holds out his arms.

With a sob, Tarrant Hightopp relinquishes his hold on Alice, settling her against Hamish’s chest. “Nauw,” the man growls through his tears, “ye ge’ yerself back teh where ye came from, an’ take Alice wi’ ye.”

Hamish spares a moment to nod in acknowledgement and then he moves to stand. Holding Alice cradled in his arms, he turns as if to descend the three steps to the field below.

“Alice…” he thinks he hears, but he can’t be sure. Hamish looks up from Alice’s pale face and sees only his own reflection in the tailor’s shop window.
He lets out a thankful breath at the familiar sight of his neighborhood in Victoria City. Wasting no time, he strides as fast as he can back to the doctor’s residence. Although he’d told Hightopp that the distance had been no more than a two-minute stroll, time seems to stretch and spiral with every step he takes. Hamish is utterly breathless by the time he staggers up the front steps and calls out, “Doctor Wellington! Doctor Wellington!”

Impatiently, he kicks the door.

“Good gracious, Lord Ascot, calm yourself!” a muffled male voice calls from within.

Hamish is too breathless to bother with a retort. Still, it seems to take ages for the doctor’s footsteps to reach the front door, a thousand years for the lock to be undone, and an entire era of human history for the portal to be swung open.

“What brings you—? Good gracious! Bring her inside!”

Complying gladly, Hamish maneuvers Alice into the narrow hall and then into the surgery just through the man’s office. He lays her down upon the examination pallet and hovers as the doctor washes up.

“What happened? I didn’t even hear the gunshot,” the man muses aloud.

“It was all so confusing,” Hamish admits.

“Do you know her?” the doctor continues, now drying his hands and reaching for a pair of fabric scissors. “I can’t ever recall approving her medical quarantine.”

“Her name is Alice Kingsleigh,” Hamish informs him, and then, swearing at his stupidity, amends. “Was Alice Kingsleigh. Her husband’s name is Hightopp and I’m not surprised that she evaded your quarantine. She likely arrived from the mainland.”

“Where is her husband?” Doctor Wellington inquires, hesitating to cut open Alice’s dress with Hamish still in the room.

Likely going utterly and inescapably mad, Hamish doesn’t say. “I’ll have him notified of his wife’s condition just as soon as she’s been treated. Please allow me to assist, sir. I realize it’s unconventional, but I owe it to both Mister and Missus Hightopp to help in any way I can. Besides,” he beseeches, “Alice and I, we’re… family.”

Doctor Wellington clearly doesn’t like it, but acquiesces rather than argue the point. “Fine, fine. Go wash your hands thoroughly with hot water and the soap provided.”

As Hamish rushes toward the wash basin to comply, the full-length looking glass beside it catches his eye. He recalls the looking glass at his family’s country estate and the vision it had shown him as he’d endeavored to complete his morning shave. As he rolls up his shirtsleeves and scrubs his hands, fingers, and knuckles, Hamish wonders if this mirror might also be a window to Underland, if the Hatter is even now watching his wife undergo surgery in a strange place, being operated on by a strange man.

Toweling his hands dry with a clean square of linen, Hamish resolves to remain at Alice’s side until he has the chance to communicate with the Hatter, to tell him she is all right.

Alice, you must be all right!

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Doctor Wellington observes, investigating the bullet hole in Alice’s bare, upper left chest. Thankfully, he’d only cut away a small portion of her dress. Although
she’s not decent, per se, she is covered. “Keep a finger on her pulse and count the beats for thirty seconds. Tell me the number.”

As Hamish complies, the doctor muses aloud to his unconscious patient, “Whatever were you doing running about the streets at night without being properly dressed, madam?”

Alice, unsurprisingly, doesn’t answer. Hamish fancies that she wouldn’t have bothered to answer the question had she been conscious. Except perhaps to say that stockings and a corset are a kind of torture. A small smile curves his lips as he imagines the scenario. He then glances up at the looking glass and does his best to offer it – and whomever may be watching – an encouraging smile… just in case.

Hamish measures Alice’s pulse when requested. He holds the pan for the bullet which Doctor Wellington extracts from deep within Alice’s shoulder. He fetches hot water when it’s time to cleanse the wound, and morphine when Alice shifts restlessly, and then, once the doctor has washed his hands yet again, Hamish passes him the requested sewing kit for closing up the wound. When, some indeterminate time later, the doctor completes the final stitch, Hamish is utterly exhausted and rather nauseous but encouraged that Alice’s pulse had remained steady throughout the entirety of the procedure.

“We shall have to wait for my housekeeper and office nurse, who is of the same gender as Missus Hightopp here, to arrive before we can remove her soiled dress and put her to bed,” the doctor says, leaning back with a sigh. “Perhaps now would be a good time to alert her husband?”

“Yes,” Hamish agrees, daringly petting her limp hair away from her cheek and forehead. “Alice, I’m going to fetch your husband now.”

Of course, Alice says nothing. She doesn’t twitch or shift or sigh. Still, Hamish feels better for having made the promise.

The doctor doesn’t chide him for the sentimentality. “I’ll put on some tea. The poor fellow will need it when he gets here, I’m sure.”

With a nod, Hamish stands and departs the room with the doctor. When Doctor Wellington turns right and heads down the hall in the direction of the kitchen, Hamish turns left and marches noisily toward the front door. He checks over his shoulder to ensure that the doctor is out of sight before he opens and then closes the door without passing through it. He then tiptoes back to the surgery and ducks into the lantern-lit room. Alice still lies upon the pallet, unmoved. He checks her pulse once again, just to be sure, and lets out a sigh of relief when he feels the flutter of her heartbeat beneath her skin.

“How on earth am I going to get your hatter here?” he asks her, hoping for some sort of sign from her. Of course, the one time he’s asking for her input, she remains obstinately silent. He sifts through his memories regarding his previous trips to Underland before deciding that the best course of action would to simply announce an invitation and hope it works.

Course set, Hamish draws a fortifying breath. But then, just as he straightens up, something catches his eye. For a moment, he actually entertains the notion that he’d glimpsed movement from the full length mirror beside the wash basin. He glances over and blinks at it. A moment later, the frame inexplicably wobbles a second time as if someone on the other side of the glass is beating their fists against it.

“Damnation,” Hamish grouches, imagining an utterly frantic hatter pounding upon a similar looking glass in Underland. Well, he can hardly follow through with his plan now; how can he invite Hightopp to step into Doctor Wellington’s surgery if the man is in the midst of a fit?
Approaching the mirror, Hamish informs the man he cannot see, “Your Alice is alive, Hightopp.”

The frame shakes again.

“She… is… fine!” Hamish repeats with exaggerated enunciation.

The looking glass rattles in response.

“Bloody… I just know I’m going to regret this,” he mutters to himself. He’s too exhausted to try pantomiming the details of Alice’s condition to the man through the mirror. He can see no other option than to revisit his original plan. Not that he’s even sure it will work…

Hamish hopes for the best as he draws a centering breath. The mirror remains still, as if the man on the other side is holding his breath as well, waiting.

Well, there’s really no sense in putting it off. Either the experiment will work or it won’t. And, given what little he knows of travel between Underland and the Above world, Hamish suspects that it cannot possibly be as simple as saying to the mirror: “Tarrant Hightopp, you may step through.”

Hamish nearly squeals with fright when, in the very next moment, a hatless and jacketless – but thankfully be-trouser-ed! – hatter falls into the surgery with a snarling sob.

“Hush!” Hamish tells him, pulling his booted feet over the edge of the mirror’s frame and into the room.

“Alice!” the man hisses urgently, scrambling to attain the vertical.

“She’s fine. She’s resting. Don’t try to wake her. Here, sit here. Hold her hand. Yes, just like that. You can feel her pulse just there. That means she’s all right.” Seeing the Hatter installed and mostly composed upon the doctor’s stool, Hamish presses his own handkerchief into one of the man’s hands. “Clean yourself up a bit,” he says, indicating the man’s tear streaked face. “You wouldn’t want Alice to become distraught upon seeing you like this.”

The last suggestion, however, seems to be a bit too much for Tarrant Hightopp to comprehend. He merely clutches the square of linen in his blood-soaked, bandaged hand. Well, if it keeps the man from clutching irreverently at Alice, it will have served at least some useful purpose after all.

With a sigh, Hamish offers, “I’ll announce your arrival.” He turns toward that door, expecting nothing but silence in response. However…

“Thank you, Hamish,” the man whispers, voice hoarse.

Pausing, Hamish studies Tarrant Hightopp’s tightly closed eyes, wondering if the man is actually attempting to commit each and every beat of Alice’s heart to memory. Hamish gives the Hatter’s shoulder a solid squeeze, and then he quietly returns himself to the front hall. From the sounds in the kitchen, the doctor is still preparing tea. Hamish takes a deep breath, readies himself for a series of necessary theatrics, and then brazenly opens the front door and slams it shut.

“Hightopp!” he calls, rushing with artificial urgency toward the surgery.

Just as Hamish draws level with the office door, the doctor pokes his head out of the kitchen and asks, “He’s arrived?”

“Yes, and he’s quite distraught. I tried to stop him from…” Hamish gestures toward the room beyond.
“Let him get it all out of his system while his wife is sedated. I’ll bring the tea.”

Hamish’s admiration of the doctor’s practicality redoubles. He steps into the office, although he doesn’t re-enter the surgery. Hamish has no desire to intrude upon Tarrant Hightopp’s silent reunion with his Alice, but he stays close by in the event that he’s needed once more.

Chapter End Notes

+ Whenever I’ve written of Hamish obsessing over trousers (and scorning kilts) I think of Broomclosetkink’s “Yesterday I Was a Different Person” and Hamish’s legendary battle cry: “I demand trousers!” Epic. OMG, epic.

+ Please don’t ask me to explain how Underland-Above travel works. It has something to do with citizens of each respective land being able to issue and revoke invitations and then there’s Underland itself, which I suspect is sentient and intent on helping out certain people like Alice and Mirana although that doesn’t explain everything... Argh. It’s all muddled up in my head. ANYWAY! All of Hamish's trips have been leading up to this moment. He arrives in Underland just in time to make himself useful and be a proper hero, which he couldn't have done if this were only his first trip to Underland. Now that he knows it's real, he takes the threat to Alice seriously and (arguably) saves her life. See? There was a Plan all along... (^__~)
Chapter 19

The first thing Alice takes note of upon waking is that today does not show much promise for being a very good day. Her head spins and she cannot quite seem to get her eyes to open. Her shoulder *burns* as if she’d been lanced with a white-hot poker and her tongue seems to be stuck to the roof of her mouth.

“Ugh,” she remarks, utterly disgusted with both the universe and her circumstances within it.

The hesitant touch of skin and rough linen upon her brow summons a small smile to her lips.

“Alice?” Tarrant lisps softly.

Alice hums, satisfied that he is here to help her get through this monstrously bad morning. If she can just rest a bit more, she’ll get up and help him start the stew for lunch and then they can begin painting the rosebushes.

No, wait. That’s not right. She and Tarrant don’t have any rosebushes and the last ones she’d painted had been in the Red Queen’s garden back when she’d been a little girl and—

Alice gasps, chokes on her own breath, and flinches. The Red Queen! Iracebeth and Hamish’s lost gun with its telltale trail of smoke and the hole in Alice’s Marmoreal-made dress and *Tarrant kneeling without his claymore and*—!

*BANG!*

“Tarrant!” she rasps urgently, at last finding the strength to open her eyes.

“Aye, laddie,” he croons, petting her cheeks gently. “I’m here.”

“Iracebeth—?” she demands, attempting to blink his face into focus.

“—is with Stayne.”

For a moment, she panics. And then she remembers that Stayne is dead. “How…?”

“Hamish,” Tarrant replies, his green eyes bright with amusement and relief, “has excellent timing.”

Alice frowns. “Well, that’s rather odd.”

“Isn’t it?” he happily concurs, still caressing her face with one hand as he reaches for something just beyond her field of vision. “Here, love, have some water. You sound parched.”

Tarrant lifts her head slowly and tips a tin cup against her lips. Maddeningly, he controls the angle so she can’t gulp the lot down as she would like to.
“I’m still thirsty,” she informs him when he takes the cup away.

“I’m told morphine is exceptionally good at making you feel that way.”

“Morphine? So I was…” She glances down at her shoulder but only blankets and the ruffles of a strange nightgown meet her gaze.

“Aye,” he replies, his hands fluttering uncertainly for a moment. “There in your shoulder. The Doctor Wellington person here says you’ve a temporary hole there.”

“I’m hole-y?” she jokes weakly.

Tarrant rewards her for the feeble attempt with a kiss to her temple and another half-full cup of water.

“So this is China?” she whispers when he lays her head back down upon the pillows and sets the drinking vessel aside. The bedroom itself is unfamiliar but the style reminds her of British interior design.

“It would seem so. There are several more rooms of it, however.”

“I should think so,” she replies on a tired giggle. Even that small movement causes her shoulder to flare with excruciating pain. For a moment, she simply focuses on breathing. When the flame within her flesh dies down a bit, she opens her eyes. “Tarrant?”

He leans forward again and Alice realizes he’d been watching, fretting, and waiting as patiently as possible for her to fight her way back to him, to the here and now. “Aye?”

She surveys him for signs of injury. “What of you?”

“China-bound,” he replies, clearly still focused upon their previous topic, “thanks to Hamish’s invitation through a sizable looking glass.”

Alice rolls her head back and forth, marveling at his wonderful nonsensery. “No, I mean… are you hurt? Did she shoot you?” Alice reaches her right hand toward him and he immediately grasps her fingers, lifting them to his cheek.

“I’m fine. As I mentioned, Hamish has excellent timing.”

Alice squints at him, “That’s very generous of you…” He could have been cursing Hamish for arriving a few minutes too late to save Alice from being shot in the first place.

“You’re eyes are open,” he replies, “and your hand is holding mine. I endeavor to forget what cannot be forgiven and forgive what cannot be forgotten.”

Her heart swells at his sagely wisdom. Is it wrong of her to feel proud of him for saying such a thing? “So, how will we get back?”

“Oh, through the looking glass, I imagine… once Hamish revokes our invitation.”

“And when will that be?”

“That depends on you.”

“I’m ready now,” she bravely informs him even as she cringes inwardly at the thought of standing upright let alone trudging through a mirror… however that’s done.
“But your fever hasn’t caught up with you yet.”

“My fever?”

“Yes, yes, the Doctor Wellington person will explain more thoroughly if you like, but he expects some fever yet to come from an injury such as yours.”

The thought of having yet another fight ahead of her is unnerving. She is not ready for it. At the moment, Alice feels as if the barest of breezes could blow her away into infinity. Her fingers tighten around his. “Will you stay?”

“Of course, Alice. I’ll stay.” Tarrant inches nearer to her bedside and, nuzzling her hand which is still grasped in his own, he closes his eyes and confesses, “Hamish, with all his timeliness, has named me your husband here, therefore my place is here, right here.”

“That explains a lot,” she muses, her eyelids growing heavy now that her curiosity has been mostly assuaged. “Husband.”

He gazes at her over their joined hands, his eyes bright with tears and twinkling with happiness.

Alice isn’t sure why he seems to be so delightfully surprised. She spares a thought to ask him but it quickly scatters. Instead, she focuses on smiling back at him, basking in the warmth of his joy.

Tarrant turns her hand within his grasp so that he can place slow, whispering kisses upon the inside of her wrist. He lingers there with his lips brushing her skin and his voice lowers further into a murmur meant for pillows and candlelight. “I would not have been able to go on again and endure it all for a second time.”

Perhaps it’s the morphine that makes a muddle of his words inside her head, but before she can ask him to elaborate, a soft knock sounds against the door. At least she’s sure it’s not her imagination that Tarrant leans away from her with gratifying reluctance. Still holding her hand, he calls out, “You may enter at will!”

Later, Alice doesn’t remember much from her first meeting with Doctor Wellington other than she’d thought he had a very auspicious surname, given his line of work. She drifts in a daze through the introductions and explanations and such, snapping to attention only when she’s introduced to the housekeeper and office nurse, Missus Mallory, who promptly orders Tarrant to help her lift Alice’s pillow so she can pour some broth into her belly.

Deprived of Tarrant’s warm grasp, Alice’s eyelids immediately begin to droop despite Missus Mallory’s imposing presence.

“Not yet, Missus Hightopp,” the woman commands. “Drink your soup first. There’s a dear.”

Alice is fully exhausted by the time the woman lets her rest. Her stomach is full and her shoulder is in flames and she feels even more lightheaded than ever, but she stubbornly reaches for Tarrant’s bandaged hand again and, squeezing it gently, whispers, “I love you.”

Tarrant’s reply is little more than an indistinct rumble of a man’s voice as sleep folds her into its arms. Time loses meaning and measurement to her as she drifts in darkness. After some indeterminable number of hours, Alice manages to roll free of slumber’s hold and opens her bleary eyes.

“Tarrant?” she thinks she whines miserably, immediately hating the sound of her own voice.

“Here, love,” he says, pressing a cool cup to her lips. “Drink, my Alice.”
“Drink me,” she mumbles in reply and falls back asleep mid sip.

She doesn’t mind the abrupt departure from Tarrant’s side so much as Thackery is there to greet her and it’s been so long since she’s had a proper chat with him. “Am I late for tea again?” she asks and he hiccups.

“Feel like a heel?” the March hare replies, giving her a thousand-yard stare very similar to Cordwain’s.

“I’m an Alishin,” she insists.

“No tools on the table!” he declares, tossing a scone at her.

Alice spends much of teatime searching for butter under the table and getting lost in teapots. When she next wakes, she does so on a moan and a shiver.

“Tarrant?”

“I’m afraid not, dear. No, with his poor hands, he’d best leave your bathing and wound dressing to me.”

Alice tries to focus on the voice – a woman’s – nearby. “Your Majesty?” she asks. Her mind is spinning like a carousel, but Alice doesn’t think she sees nearly enough white for the figure leaning over her to be the White Queen.

“You’ve a fever, Missus Hightopp. Just rest and let me cool your brow.”

Alice’s right hand flutters atop the blankets. “Tarrant,” she repeats.

“He’ll be back soon.”

“No claymore,” Alice hears herself insist. “Absolutely no claymores in the house.”

“I’ll let him know, dear. Here, have a bit more medicine for your shoulder.”

Alice grimaces as an increasingly familiar, bitter liquid touches her tongue. “Pishalver,” she croaks discontentedly and then falls back down the rabbit hole.

*~*~*~*~*

Hamish can imagine only a handful of reasons why Tarrant Hightopp would be compelled to leave Alice’s side (and with great and grumpy reluctance at that). He imagines that the man paces the hall whenever the nurse is tending to her. He imagines that the man’s eyes sometimes flash yellow with worry, fear, and irritation. The images are so vivid that Hamish nearly trips over his own feet on the threshold of Doctor Wellington’s office upon his arrival for a midday visit to check on Alice’s condition. He blinks at the sight of Tarrant Hightopp sedately enduring an examination of his unwrapped hands.
“This is a nasty gash,” the doctor informs him, neatly applying stitches to the man’s thumb.

“Hat pins can be very dangerous,” the Hatter agrees.

Hamish dithers in the hall, still gawking, for a moment longer. In that moment, however, he notices the way the Hatter’s other hand seems to alternately knead the air and tap his fingers against some invisible surface. He focuses on watching the doctor’s progress, however, as if learning an addition to his craft.

“You sew rather competently despite your lack of experience in haberdashery,” the Hatter remarks in a tone that’s just a bit tight with stress.

“Thank you,” Doctor Wellington replies pleasantly.

Hamish gapes at the surreal moment. Never mind that most men would have been intimidated and disturbed by the Hatter’s strangeness (Doctor Wellington clearly appears to be acclimated to all sorts of individuals… perhaps due to the plying of his trade in distant lands) what Hamish cannot fathom is Tarrant Hightopp’s relative calm.

But, just then, above the office itself, a board creaks. Hightopp’s gaze snaps upward and his lips compress as he listens to the goings-on in Alice’s room just over his head.

“Missus Mallory will be finished presently,” the doctor says in a patient tone.

“Lately,” the Hatter brusquely corrects the man. “As it is now presently and she has not yet finished assisting Alice.”

“Of course.”

Still debating whether or not to announce himself, Hamish glances about the room and frowns as he spies a tangle of bloody bandages in the bin beside Hightopp’s foot. They’d clearly been cut off of the Hatter’s hand. What puzzles Hamish is he’s sure that the abundance of blood thereon cannot possibly be Alice’s. For one thing, the blood is bright red rather than dark with the passage of time. And, for another, there doesn’t appear to be any of it on the outside of the wrappings, which means—

“Are you bleeding, Hightopp?” Hamish barks rudely, his astonishment overcoming both his manners and slightly upset stomach.

The doctor doesn’t even look up from his task. “He did and quite profusely. I haven’t seen the like in years.”

The Hatter, in his own defense, retorts, “My heart was pounding!”

While Doctor Wellington might not be able to suss out the significance of that, Hamish feels as if it makes a rather odd sort of sense. The more pertinent point, however, is that the man’s heart is clearly beating again, which must mean that it is no longer broken!

Hamish steps into the room and lowers his voice: “Does Alice know? About your… hands?”

Tarrant Hightopp glances up through his shaggy brows and nearly whispers, “No. No, it happened just before she…”

When the man trails off, Hamish doesn’t insist on a full explanation. “How—?” he unthinkingly asks.
Before he can tell the Hatter to never mind, the man says nonsensically, “She answered the riddle.”

Hamish parrots, “A riddle?”

Surely a mere riddle cannot be a true obstacle to the healing of a broken heart! And yet, the Hatter hails from a place which permits hearts to literally break. Perhaps, in context, this does make perfect sense. Still, it’s no sense that Hamish can comprehend.


Hamish admits to himself that he is undeniably curious about this riddle, but bites his tongue rather than ask. Contenting himself with this evidence that the man’s heart beats once again, that Alice may yet be given the love she deserves, Hamish lets the matter drop.

“Congratulations, Hightopp,” he offers instead.

The Hatter quirks a grin at him. “Thank you.”

“There!” the doctor concludes with a satisfied sigh. “All stitched up.”

“If I might impose upon your hospital and hospitality for a second set of bandage-wear?” the Hatter requests humbly.

“Of course,” Doctor Wellington replies, fetching a bundle of clean wrappings from the shelf and measuring out half an arm’s length. “Do you need assistance with wrapping your hands? I’d like to look in on your wife now.”

“I’ll assist,” Hamish offers, noticing the way the doctor holds out a hand to keep the Hatter from lunging out of his seat.

“Make sure he eats,” Doctor Wellington adds, nodding toward a tray upon the desk. The Hatter gives the meal a disinterested glance. Hamish feels a scowl of determination pull his brows together and pinch his mouth. “Oh, he’ll eat.”

The doctor doesn’t see the Hatter petulantly roll his eyes in response to Hamish’s declaration. Doctor Wellington departs the office and trudges noisily up the stairs to see to his other patient.

“Give me your dominant hand, Hightopp,” Hamish instructs.

Indifferently, the Hatter complies.

For a moment, the silence is slightly strained as their respective worries pull them into their own thoughts. Hamish wraps the hospital linen around the Hatter’s just-stitched thumb and, rather than asking him if he’s in pain, inquires instead, “How is Alice?”

“Feverish,” the man replies. “For the first of possibly several days.”

“Yes, fevers can linger that long,” Hamish remarks, frowning.

“She’s alone in her fever. Wherever it is her mind takes her, I cannot follow.” The man scowls mightily at this, as if he is a soldier abandoned by his commander.

“You’re to be her anchor now,” Hamish replies. “Lest she confuses the waking world with her dreams.”
The Hatter giggles softly. “Alice is very stubborn about dreaming. We’ve had a discussion on the subject once before.”

Unsure if he’d like the particulars on that, Hamish finishes off the wrapping and nudges the man’s shoulder. “Eat while I wrap the other hand.”

With a sigh, the Hatter complies, spooning great bites of shepherd’s pie into his mouth. Hamish doubts the man even tastes it, given how hastily he swallows it down.

“What became of Iracebeth?” Hamish asks, honestly curious.

The Hatter sets his spoon down with a grimace at the remaining bites of pie upon the dish. “I woke the pigeons in the aviary and asked them to deliver a message to Marmoreal at dawn. The White Queen has likely already sent the army to collect her sister’s body.”

“Her sister?” Hamish gasps, horrified. He falters midway through dressing the Hatter’s left hand.

The Hatter blinks at him. “Oh yes. Mirana of Marmoreal banished her to the Outlands with Stayne for their crimes against Underland.”

Hamish remains stock-still, mind racing. Dear God, he’d shot and killed Mirana’s sister!

A moment – or an hour – later, he startles when the Hatter’s hand clamps down on his shoulder.

“I didn’t tell her it was you. I wrote only that she’d trespassed and injured Alice.”

“But… how can that be enough?” Surely, he’ll be called before the White Queen to answer for the death of her sister. Surely, he has lost all regard in her eyes.

“It’s enough,” the Hatter informs him in a tone that allows for no argument.

Hamish hopes he’s right. Still… “I didn’t want to kill her. I just wanted…”

The Hatter nods. “There were a great many people whom she killed. They didn’t want to die. The Bloody Red Queen – she had a way o’ makin’ ye do tha’ which ye didnae wan’teh: dyin’… killin’… Th’ White Queen understands tha’.”

Unable to utter a reply, Hamish nods. He’s not sure if he can accept this as truth in place of Mirana’s verdict, but – in the meantime – he will try.

In any case, the sound of footsteps leaving Alice’s room upstairs and descending to the ground floor forestall further discussion. The Hatter stands eagerly and strides to the office doorway.

“She’s asking for you, sir,” Missus Mallory says.

Tarrant Hightopp heads for the stairs without a single glance back. Hamish, rather than being put off, is heartened by the man’s dedication to Alice. He shares a few words with Missus Mallory and then departs to get on with the business of the day at the company office near the wharf.

Over the course of the next few days, Hamish has many more occasions to observe the Hatter’s single-minded devotion to his Alice. When Hamish arrives the evening after next, he notes that the doctor is currently with a patient so Hamish heads upstairs to see how Alice is faring. What he hears as he pauses in the hall outside her room, however—!

“Please, Tarrant, no more Pishalver. The children don’t like it when I’m so small.”

“The children, Alice?” Tarrant Hightopp whispers, frightened.
“Yes,” Alice replies in a listless, dreamy tone that Hamish has never heard from her before. “Diana loves to wear her daddy’s top hat and twirl. It’s the sash, you know. Salmon is her favorite color this week. And Edan, the little monkey. He clings to your legs and tickles you behind your knees just to hear you laugh, but he doesn’t realize yet that you’re already laughing, always laughing. And then there’s Amelia with her sticky hands. I’m sorry she makes so many messes, Tarrant, but now that she’s walking…”

“Ye’ve seen auwr children, Alice?” This time, Hamish thinks he hears tears in the man’s choked voice.

Alice sighs. “It’s so hard to hold onto them. The moment I reach out they disappear. Why do you think that is? Do they have evaporation skills?”

“I don’t know, Alice… my Alice…”

Hamish does not intrude. Instead, he retreats down the stairs and waits for the doctor to be available. When he is, Hamish hurriedly addresses the issue he’d overheard upstairs. “However much morphine Alice has had,” he says in a terse tone, “is far too much. Let her have the pain. She’d prefer it to being lost in her own mind.”

Doctor Wellington frowns. “Her husband hasn’t mentioned anything to me about hallucinations.”

He wouldn’t, of course. Not if he thought doing so might impede Alice’s recovery. “Sometimes, a man can be too accommodating of his wife,” Hamish replies diplomatically.

“Ah. We’ll decrease the dosage then and see how she does.”

“Has the fever abated?”

“A bit.”

A bit. It isn’t much progress, but it is welcome nonetheless. With a nod of thanks, Hamish mounts the stairs once more. Now that Alice’s needs have been taken care of, he feels inexplicably responsible for his other guest’s wellbeing.

“Hightopp,” Hamish calls quietly upon peeking into the room and finding Alice asleep and her would-be husband clutching her hand tightly, bowed over it as if in prayer. “Hightopp,” he says again, a bit louder this time.

Hearing Missus Mallory’s shoes upon the stairs, ascending toward Alice’s room, Hamish guides the Hatter into the doctor’s private study down and across the hallway.

“Here,” Hamish says, offering the man yet another handkerchief. “There’s a wash stand just there.”

Glumly, the hatless man trudges over to it. He glares blearily at his own reflection of blotchy cheeks and reddened, puffy eyes in the small mirror on the wall before pouring a measure of water from the pitcher into the basin and splashing liberally in it.
Once finished, however, Tarrant Hightopp doesn’t move from the wash stand. He braces himself against it and says to the water in the ceramic bowl, “I’m in need of new bandages.”

“Surely you don’t need them on so many fingers now,” Hamish replies, recalling that his wounds had been treated two afternoons before.

“I do. Alice wouldn’t know her hatter without them.”

It’s a sobering thing to contemplate: this man has carried the same wounds for as long as Alice has known him. Perhaps longer.

There is nothing Hamish can do to address that issue. Rather than dwell on it, he continues down his checklist regarding the health of his “guests” in Hong Kong. “Are you sleeping at all, Hightopp?”

The man grousches in reply, “D’ye think I’d be sae pale if’n I were?”

Indeed, with his heart now beating, he ought to have a bit more color. Still… “Yes,” Hamish replies. “For all I know you’re pale with worry.”

One corner of the Hatter’s mouth twitches upward in a helpless grin. “Aye, thar’s tha’.”

“You need rest – a proper rest,” Hamish lectures. He briefly considers inviting the man to stay at his home down the street, but discards the idea; Tarrant Hightopp would never agree to put so much distance (short though it is) between himself and his injured Alice. “I’ll speak to Doctor Wellington about accommodating you on a sofa or—”

“I’ll no’ tolerate bein’ apart from her,” the Hatter replies, his lip curling with distaste and his eyes flashing. “I’m her anchor.”

Blast. Hamish bites back several other choice examples of coarse language as his own words to the man make a highly unpleasant about-face. “You’re useless to her as you are now,” he rejoindres. “What’s more, Alice is not even thinking clearly thanks to the fever and the morphine. She is out of her mind! When this passes – and it will –” Hamish is sure of this as Alice’s fever has not reached a critical level as of yet. “She will not even remember a single word she has spoken to you. Not today nor any other day over the course of her illness. She won’t even remember you sitting with her at all hours.”

“Mayhap she’s mae anchor,” the Hatter replies softly, stubbornly.

Hamish sighs. Yes, the man is being obstinate, but Hamish knows how startling new places can be, especially when a man is not given the chance to gain his equilibrium. “Mister Hightopp,” Hamish says as kindly as he can despite the fact that his next words are an order, “Alice requires two things of you: that you rest and that you eat. If you do not replenish your strength, you will cause her needless distress when she is herself once again.”

When the man releases a long sigh, when he hangs his head and leans heavily upon the wash stand, Hamish relishes the scent of victory. At long, bloody last, someone is being reasonable!

“Fine,” the Hatter bites out. “But I am not leaving her side.”

“What will you do, then? Camp on the floor beside her bed like an outdoorsman?”

“Yes,” the Hatter answers brightly. “A marvelous solution. Between the rug and the chair, I’ll be fine.”
Hamish gives up. Truly, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make the blasted creature drink.

The Hatter continues, “And you’re wrong about Alice’s unclear thinking and her not-Alice-ness; she is very clearly and absolutely Alice. She is simply elsewhere.”

“Be that as it may,” Hamish replies, not bothering to argue with such stubbornness (he’d learned that much from dealing with Alice herself!), “I don’t envy you when she finally comes round; she’ll be livid to discover that she’s lost three entire days.” And possibly more yet to come…

The Hatter’s green eyes flash upward and his slightly-dark lips curl into a rueful smile. “Aye. Ye’re righ’ abou’ tha’.”

Hamish is sure he is. And, what’s more, she’ll be doubly irritated to learn that she’d been oblivious to the Hatter’s unwavering presence throughout that time. An irritated Alice, Hamish knows, is a surly, cantankerous Alice. He, therefore, makes a note not to be in the vicinity when the realization of lost time and missed Hatter occurs to her.

Chapter End Notes

+ Alice doesn’t really return to Underland during her convalescence. That’s just the fever at work.

+ Yet again, the riddle of the raven and the writing desk is significant in my AiW fic. In this case, it is the cure for his broken heart. No wonder he keeps asking Alice to solve this very riddle in the film! I’m on to you, Woolverton (the scriptwriter) & Burton!

+ “Alice is very stubborn about dreaming. We’ve had a discussion on the subject once before” is in reference to the balcony scene in the film. (Although I guess they also talked about it in this fic, in the opening scene on the battlefield.)

+ So, I was walking around town and I thought to myself, “Hm, let’s name Alice and Tarrant’s son ‘Edan’… I dunno what it means or if it’s even Gaelic, but it sounds cool.” Guys, GUYS, I just checked and not only is “Edan” Gaelic/Celtic, it also means “fire.” (Whereas “Tarrant” means “thunder.”) OMG, I’m feeling kinda psychic over here…!
in which bandages are no longer needed and a dreadful deed is discussed

Chapter 20

Alice opens her eyes and frowns. Her shoulder hurts, her throat is dry, her limbs are heavy, her thoughts are scattered, and the flicking flame of a nearby candle is giving her a mild headache.

As Mally would say: she’s just peachy.

She shifts a bit, feeling too-warm and restless. Feverish. Ah, yes. Tarrant had warned her to expect that; the details are oddly fuzzy, however. She blinks her eyes several times, trying to shake off the vestiges of a sleep which feels as deep as those experienced by fairytale princesses in locked towers guarded by dragons. With annoyingly unsteady, eye-stinging, eternally burning candles to boot.

With a put-upon sigh, she turns away from the light on the sideboard and discovers a prince slumped over the edge of her borrowed bed. She smiles at Tarrant’s wild mane of orange hair and savors the sight of him. Alice isn’t sure exactly how long it’s been since he’d promised to stay with her during the coming fever – half a day, maybe? – but she has missed him!

Her heart aches at the sight of his exhaustion. He cannot possibly be comfortable seated awkwardly in that wooden chair with only his own folded forearms for a pillow.

Carefully, mindful of the pain she could awaken in her hole-y shoulder with a needlessly hasty movement, Alice reaches for his arm. Her fingertips brush over his wrist and she lays her hand upon him, her heart racing and breath sighing at the simple feel of his skin. But then his name wedges in her throat as something stirs beneath her touch. Alice forgets about waking him with a gentle shake and ordering him to lay down for a proper rest. She pauses at the feel of something buzzing gently beneath the skin of his tender, inner wrist.

She reaches a bit more, presses her fingertips just a little more insistently against him and…

Is it…? Is that…?

“A pulse,” she whispers, disbelieving.

For a minute (or maybe more), Alice simply holds his arm and feels the rhythm of his blood moving through his veins. And yet, with every moment that passes, her fear that she is dreaming redoubles. Hating to wake him – but, if this is a dream, then it wouldn’t matter, would it? – she releases his wrist and reaches for his nearest hand which stretches toward her across the blankets. Gingerly, Alice investigates the bandages on his fingers.

“These are new,” she remarks softly, not recognizing the weave or weight of the material.

It’s a simple matter to untuck the end of the gauze. It’s a more delicate operation to unwind it from around his baldy wounded thumb without disturbing his sleep, but what Alice sees makes the effort worth it. In the dim light of the obnoxiously flickering candle, Alice counts several tiny indentations (from recently removed stitches) spaced evenly along a fresh, pinkish scar.

She gasps and her headache flares, but Alice can’t be bothered to care about it at the moment. She
blinks at the evidence that Tarrant’s hands are healing, that the blood which races through his veins is not a product of her hopeful imagination. Still, she needs to confirm, just to be sure…!

Alice reaches toward his collar and, uninvited, places her hand against the side of his neck. Her eyes drift closed as she feels it there just below his ear: the steady and sure beat of his heart marking time.

“Ah!” she sighs, tears gathering in her eyes and burning hotter than the too-dry, fevered skin of her face.

Under her hand, he stirs, rolling his chin toward her touch and lisping sleepily, “Alice?”

She watches – the syllables which make up his beloved name still tangled up in her throat – as he sits up, blinking blearily and gently holding her hand against his skin. He still looks pale – as if he hasn’t slept well in days! – but he is not as deathly pale as she remembers. Perhaps his complexion is simply naturally pale…

Alice smiles at him through her tears and, without saying a word, takes the liberty of sliding her palm down to rest daringly over his heart. She touches him as if she is his wife in name, practice, and manner rather than his partner in a handfasting. (Although, in all honesty, she’s not sure if there’s much difference between the two.) Still, she will blame the fever later for her forward behavior if she must.

Tarrant does not object. “Ye’re back,” he murmurs in a reverent, thankful tone. He shudders and presses his own hand over hers, steadying her and prolonging her touch. For a long moment, she simply smiles through her tears.

And then she whispers, “Let me hear it?”

Still holding her hand, he stands from his chair and seats himself upon the bed. “Don’t move, love,” he whispers as he leans back against the headboard and stretches his left arm across the pillows and behind her head. He snuggles against her with great care until his chest is beside her cheek and her hand, still grasped in his, is held comfortably against his breast.

Alice summons her strength and lifts her head. In the next instant, he has slid down just enough for her to press her ear to his waistcoat, to the place just over his heart. His shoulder beneath her head holds her steady – anchors her – and she closes her eyes and listens.

Thump. Tha-thump! Thump. Tha-thump!

_It sounds like Cordwain_, she almost says, recalling the hare’s irregular gait and when-he-deigns-to-use-it cane. Instead, she breathes out, “Tarrant.”

“Aye. Ye mended me, mae Alice,” he softly assures her. He lifts his left hand from the pillows and presses his palm to her still-warm forehead.

“Was it the words?” she asks, recalling that she’d confessed her love to him as they’d lain side by side in that distant, grassy field. “Or the candle?” The one she’d offered him before he’d gone out to the washing room?

“Aye,” he replies. “’Twas th’ boots, th’ trust, th’ kiss, th’ words, th’ candle, th’ riddle ye figured righ’ly…”

Oh, yes. The riddle. The puzzle she’d hesitantly answered, causing him to stiffen suddenly and inexplicably. The one he’d riddled her as they’d stood on the porch of their new home, contemplating the future and the moon; the one he’d offered moments before he’d gotten down on
bended knee, had held her hands with bandaged fingers, and begun to ask her to be his. Alice closes her eyes and remembers that moment. She also remembers thinking that his bandages were becoming strangely darker. Now she knows that she hadn’t imagined it; his heart had started beating then and thus his hands had started bleeding.

And his first reaction had not been to seek medical assistance. No, his first act had been to assure her of their future together, of his promise to be hers.

She sighs. “Tarrant?”

“Hm?” His fingertips brush gently against her temple, combing through her hair.

“Do you know why a raven is like a writing desk?”

Beneath her cheek, his heart beats faster for a moment before settling back into its lopsided gait.

“Because they share a hearth and a life together, my Alice.”

“Hm,” she agrees. “I like that.”

“It’s a very nice hearth,” he concurs. “And it will be a beautiful life.”

She doesn’t doubt that but… “I meant being your Alice,” she mumbles into the fabric of his vest as sleep once more begins to nudge her toward oblivion. “I like being yours.”

“I like it, too,” she hears him whisper back. In the next instant, she falls into darkness which is warm, alive, and – somehow – smells like him.

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“It’s time we headed back home,” Alice insists.

Hamish grits his teeth, draws in a fortifying breath, and prepares to wrestle with her bullheaded nature. Apparently, she’d come to her senses sometime last night and Hightopp, the rotter, hadn’t seen fit to warn Hamish when he’d arrived for his usual morning check-in. “Your fever has only just abated,” he informs the woman sitting up in bed.

She glares at him. “Tarrant told me we’ve been here for five days, Hamish. Five! Not an afternoon or even a night. Five days!”

Hamish swallows back a sigh at her consternated expression. “My fever is gone and Missus Mallory has shown me how to wrap my arm to keep my shoulder from hurting too badly; it’s time to get back.

“And do what?” he challenges, “Paint the barn?”

Her answer is a forceful glower. “If that’s what needs doing, then yes!”

With a supreme act of will, Hamish sets aside the urge to strangle her. “Now, Alice,” he attempts to argue as logically and dispassionately as possible, “will you honestly force that poor man to not only look after you but that new house of yours as well?” Her eyes flash with impudence and
revolt. Hamish hurriedly concludes, “Or will you set your recovery back *weeks* by pushing yourself too hard in an attempt to assist him?”

In response to this, guilt nudges aside her anger.

Pressing his advantage, Hamish continues, “Stay for an additional week. I’d be pleased to accommodate you and Hightopp in my home. After a bit of regulated exercise and activity, your strength with surely return.”

He holds his breath, waiting and hoping for her acquiescence. If she continues to argue with him, he may have to run the gamut of Hightopp-logic in order to acquire an ally in this venture.

Alice glances at him once more before she lets out a gusty sigh. “Fine. You’re right. I haven’t the strength to be of much use at the moment anyway.”

“Strength which wanes will also wax,” he reminds her generously (and he can afford to be generous now that she’s agreed to be sensible).

“Will it?” she whispers, sounding utterly overwhelmed by the convalescence ahead of her.

“It will. You are the strongest woman I know,” he replies, winning a smile from her. “Now, stay abed today and read that hatter of yours a book.” Hamish gestures to the small bookshelf above the chest of drawers. “I shall arrange for the tailor to stop by as soon as possible to take your measurements for a new dress. A *proper* one.” Hamish frowns. “And a suit for Hightopp. The man doesn’t even have a jacket.”

Alice laughs weakly. “Oh, Hamish. Whatever would we do without you?”

“Embarrass yourselves in public, I’m sure,” he replies as stuffily as he can manage.

Alice giggles and then winces as the motion jars her shoulder.

“You’ll take the morphine if you have difficulty resting, won’t you?” he checks, moving to gather up his jacket and work satchel.

“I most certainly will not. That damnable substance has cost me days of my life!”

And her sanity. Still, Hamish isn’t about to mention that. “Then you’ll have to beat yourself upon the head with a book in order to induce the same effect,” he retorts, abandoning his preparations to leave in order to select a suitably solid-looking volume from the bookshelf and place it upon the sideboard, within easy reach.

Alice snorts. “Why use a book when I can merely goad you into strangling me into unconsciousness?”


Interestingly, Alice blushes. “Thank you… for that.”

In other words, thank you for not telling everyone that Hightopp is merely a man she is living with in carnal sin as his wife? “I stand by what I said before,” he replies, lowering his voice, “if he does right by you, then I’ve no reason to make his life a waking misery.”

Alice fiddles nervously with the blanket beneath her right hand. She probably would have twisted the thing mercilessly in her grasp had her other arm not been bound securely in a sling. “He was asking me, on bended knee, when Iracebeth—”
Hamish recalls the scene he’d walked in on vividly, despite the confusing circumstances. What rises to the forefront of his mind, however, is not that the Hatter had somehow had the good sense to ask Alice to marry him, but the enduring horror that Hamish had shot and killed Mirana’s own sister.

“She was horrid, you know,” Alice volunteers softly, with uncanny timing.

Hamish glances up, unsure if he wants her to try to ease his conscience or not.

“It was her garden you stepped into on that first visit, where we were digging the graves. It was her moat you saw, and the victims of her executions.”

He remembers. His stomach rolls sickeningly in reaction.

“Eighty-seven,” Alice says. “That’s how many graves we dug, and there were undoubtedly more whose passing left no trace. That is the saddest of all.”

“Why, if she was so terrible, did Mirana, er, the White Queen permit her to live?”

Alice gives him a sad smile. “She’s taken a vow not to harm any living creature. That includes you Hamish. Even if she were furious with you for what you did, she would never harm you. But I know her well enough to say with confidence that, although she’s most certainly grieving, she doesn’t blame you. How can she? Iracebeth made her own path. Mirana gave her at least one chance to repent, but she refused.” Alice’s free hand flutters in a helpless gesture. “What’s done is done.”

Indeed.

“But,” she continues in a brighter tone, “on your next visit, perhaps you’ll permit her to tell you that herself.”

Hamish sighs.

“Which reminds me,” Alice drawls playfully, setting off the equivalent of fire alarms in Hamish’s mind and making him wonder what in the blazes is taking Hightopp so long to get back here with Alice’s breakfast. Eyes bright, clear, and twinkling, she inquires, “What sort of notions do you hold when it comes to the study of alchemy?”
Chapter 21

After promising Hamish that she will never again mention buttered fingers or urine of the horsefly in his presence (and after he stops accusing her of suffering permanent brain damage from her fever), Hamish rather pompously and with much blustering takes his leave. On his way out, he passes Tarrant in the hall and Alice unashamedly attempts to eavesdrop as Hamish has a few words with him. Irritatingly, the man speaks too softly for Alice to hear precisely what he says. It must have been amusing, however, because Tarrant reenters her room snorting with mirth.

“Hamish says he’s armed you with a book and I’m to beware,” he explains, simultaneously setting down her breakfast tray and answering the questioning look she gives him.

Alice rolls her eyes. “Oh yes, ‘tis mightier than the sword,” she mocks, reaching for the volume and reading the title: “Sense and Sensibility.” She huffs out an exasperated laugh. “That utter… man!” she exclaims, slamming the book back down on the table.

Tarrant pointedly clears his throat. “Perhaps it’s not only the book I’m to beware of?”

Alice snorts softly with a tickle of wry humor. “Yes, please learn from Hamish’s very bad example.”

“Done and noted,” he promises, smiling. “Tea?”

She nods and listens to him hum to himself as he prepares their cups. Alice finds herself mesmerized by the burgeoning color of health in his face, knowing it is his renewed heart which forces the deathly whiteness to retreat. When the tray is ready for them, Tarrant eases an arm behind her shoulders and helps her to sit up. She takes this chance to breathe deeply, savoring his warmth and Hatterness.

He finishes arranging the pillows behind her and, as he steps back, she reaches for him with her right hand, touching the side of his face. Tarrant pauses immediately and gives her his full attention. Petting the lingering circles beneath his eyes, Alice guesses, “You didn’t rest much at all while I was ill, did you?”

His answer consists of the softening of his expression and eloquent silence. With unbandaged but scarred fingers, he gently arranges her hair, tucking it behind her ear.

“I look forward to seeing more of this,” she tells him, brushing her thumb along his chin. “Color suits you.”

He seems oddly bashful in response to the compliment. “You may look as often as you like,” he invites her quietly.

Tarrant’s gaze moves over her and he leans in just a bit. Alice feels her lips part as his eyes darken with emotion and then, just when she’s sure that he means to kiss her—

He steps away, clearing his throat.
Alice swallows back her sigh of disappointment. True, this is not the place for such things but… it would have been very nice.

The tailor and seamstress that Hamish had warned her about arrive after her afternoon nap (during which Tarrant had endeavored to make sense of the novel Hamish had plucked from the shelf). Alice endures having her measurements taken while Missus Mallory assists her with standing upright. She finds that the simple task makes her startlingly lightheaded.

“I would like you to disregard whatever instructions Lord Ascot gave you, madam,” Alice says to the middle-aged milliner woman. “Well, with the exception of warning you against my innate stubbornness and current ill temper.”

The woman chuckles briefly without breaking stride (so to speak) in her measuring of Alice’s shoulders and arms. “And what instructions would you give me, Missus Hightopp?”

“I’d prefer a simple blouse and a skirt. Something which I can put on and take off myself with one hand.”

“That we can do and much faster than altering one of our day dresses for you, but what of your arm itself? Would you like a capelet rather than a jacket?”

Alice sighs with relief. “That would be perfect, thank you.”

“If I may be so bold as to say,” the seamstress volunteers as Missus Mallory assists Alice with climbing back into bed a few minutes later, “you are far more agreeable than your cousin lets on.”

*My cousin, indeed, Hamish you paranoid peacock.* “Ah, well, I do try to restrain myself when in the presence of someone who has not earned my full irritation.”

Laughing, the woman departs, leaving Alice to rest.

“Missus Mallory,” Alice begins as she settles back in bed. She considers the way the woman expertly handles her, avoiding irritating her still-healing shoulder. Surely, this woman had been her main caretaker, helping her to the chamber pot and changing her nightgown, even bathing her over the past five days. She highly doubts that the doctor would have permitted Tarrant to assist her in such personal ways, husband or not. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

The nurse smiles kindly. “Think nothing of it, dear.”

Alice returns her smile and, left to her own devices, fusses a bit with her blankets.

“I really must get out of this bed as soon as possible,” she tells Tarrant when he returns from his own suit-fitting in the room across the hall. “I’m utterly useless.”

“I strongly suspect that is untrue,” he argues, picking up the book again and waving it in the air.

“Well, perhaps I could muster up the strength to use my only weapon, but it would have to be under dire circumstances.”

He snorts with abbreviated humor. “As we are not currently faced with dire circumstances,” he replies playfully and begins flipping through the pages, “perhaps you could answer a question of mine instead.”

“I will do my best.”

Gazing at the text before him, Tarrant queries, “Are relations amongst one’s family members truly
as complicated and convoluted as expressed here in this tome?"

Having read the book herself, Alice laughs and tries to ignore the burning of her shoulder in response to the sudden movement. “Often times they are more so.”

“I’m afraid I cannot offer you such an, er, entertaining variety of relatives, Alice,” he informs her sadly.

Alice sobers. She reaches for his hand and is a little startled by how readily he grips her fingers. “I wish I’d met them – your family,” she replies quietly, “but, despite that, I’ve found nothing lacking in our life at Iplam.”

“Truly, Alice?”

“Tarrant,” she sighs, shaking her head at him. “I’ve the remainder of our year and a day to win your love. There is nothing else more precious to me than that.”

He looks away as if struck by a sudden episode of bashfulness. “I cannot vouch for the quality of such a prize, but…”


“Do you?” he replies, quirking his brows with renewed humor. “Even if – at present – I can do naught but warm your hands and read you passages from dusty tomes?”

“What a coincidence,” Alice teases him back, “for that’s precisely the sort of fellow I require at the moment.”

They spend the evening thus: Tarrant reads, pausing to make some delightfully insightful observation or pose a hypothetical question, and Alice dozes. They eat from a tray brought up by Missus Mallory and then Tarrant excuses himself while Alice bathes and readies herself for more time spent in that damned bed. She wishes for fresh bed linens, but cannot bring herself to ask for them as she and Tarrant will likely be leaving on the morrow once their new clothes have been delivered.

She tries to stifle her restlessness. Sitting up with Tarrant helps. They discuss how they will organize their yet-to-be-built joint workshops and shop front. Tarrant will need tall looking glasses and Alice short ones, as well as stools of all sizes just like Cordwain has in his shop.

“If I had a bit of charcoal and paper, I could sketch all this down,” he murmurs at one point, his eyes twinkling at Alice’s suggestion of various doors – in all sizes – for their wide variety of future customers to use.

“I can see it very clearly,” she assures him. “It’ll look much like the Room of Doors. Have you ever been there?”

Amazingly, he hasn’t, which prompts Alice to begin describing it in all its great, grimy detail.

The doctor bids them a good night and the clock downstairs chimes the ten o’clock hour before Alice is tired enough to sleep, but without the freedom to shift and roll as she would often do over the course of a night, she wakes periodically, mood disgruntled and shoulder wound stinging. Nearly every time she blinks open her eyes, she discovers Tarrant unmoved from his slouch. Still seated in his chair, he slumps over the edge of her bed onto his forearms.

Her heart aches at the sight. Surely Hamish or Doctor Wellington had encouraged him to rest in an actual bed. Well, Alice decides, this trend will change and change soon!
When Alice wakes up for the final time the next morning and finds Tarrant flipping through the pages of a different novel, she starts the day with announcing her intention to get some exercise. She spends much of the morning alternately pacing back and forth in her bedroom and sitting on the edge of her bed for brief rests while Tarrant hovers, offering to brush her hair or fetch her tea.

Their clothing is delivered just before lunch and, with Missus Mallory’s assistance, Alice bathes and dresses. She makes a mental note to thank Hamish for his generosity. Well, in her case, the clothing is a necessity. In Tarrant’s, while there’s nothing wrong with his usual clothing like, say, a large blood stain and a sizeable swatch of fabric missing from the shoulder, it would have been an embarrassment to Hamish to be seen associating with a man with short trousers and mismatched stockings in public. How utterly irritating it all is. She’s more sure now than ever before that Underland is her true home. And Hamish, despite being surprisingly resilient and adaptable to the delightful madness there… well, she can’t expect him to fly in the face of social convention simply because he’s been to Underland a few times. The maxim “When in Rome” applies equally at both ends of the rabbit hole.

Alice sighs. Yes, she’ll have to thank Cousin Hamish properly. It’s the least she can do considering the financial burden they’ve placed upon him.

Upon his arrival later that afternoon, Alice expresses her gratitude (and also Tarrant’s) before moving on to her most pressing concern regarding their imminent stay under his roof:

“Please tell me you have a bed or a couch for Tarrant to use,” Alice requests.

“Alice, I’m fine—” Tarrant begins, attempting to perk up a bit from his exhausted slouch. Before she can point out that the dark circles beneath his eyes speak for themselves, Hamish clears his throat and informs them, “I’m afraid I only have one guestroom available but, as it was used by the previous occupant’s wife – whom I’m given to understand was quite fond of Parisian fashions – it also contains a fainting couch. Will that be sufficient?”

Tarrant’s brows twitch nervously.

Alice beams, thrilled that he’s not even attempting to put them in separate rooms. “Cousin Hamish,” she replies, “that is perfect.”

Tarrant noticeably withholds judgment.

They thank the doctor (Alice assumes Hamish had already paid for her treatment and it bothers her that she has no means of reimbursing him) and then they three very carefully begin the short walk to Hamish’s residence.

*~*~*~*

After the stress of the past week, Hamish is relieved to have Alice upright and conscious, moving under own power and even offering him grudging thanks. Relieved and redeemed. He feels as if he owes it to Helen Kingsleigh as the only other person on Earth who had been present in that
hallway and had watched Alice disappear before their very eyes.

Yes, Helen Kingsleigh would have asked him to look after Alice. He’s glad he has managed such successful results despite the request never having been made.

And yet, now he has yet another challenge before him. Alice and Tarrant Hightopp are now his official guests – houseguests, even! – here in China. The weight which had been lifted from him upon seeing Alice’s returning health revisits. As their host, there is still much he must do. And, as Helen Kingsleigh’s representative, there is even more he must see to.

But he resolutely pushes those thoughts away for another time. He takes a deep breath, forces himself to pay attention to his surroundings, and is startled to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirrored surface of the tailor’s window.

“It was just here,” Hamish volunteers as they pass the shop. He wonders why he feels compelled to remark on it; Alice hadn’t asked about the night of her rescue, nor had Hightopp. And yet he’s inexplicably driven to speak of it. “I glanced in the window as I passed by. It was very late and the moon was unusually bright.”

Alice’s fingers tighten upon his arm as he slows his strides even more and Hightopp, on Alice’s opposite side, considerately matches the new pace.

“I looked into the window and rather than seeing the homes across the street reflected in it, I saw a meadow and a newly built house. I turned and, suddenly, there I was.”

He encounters no observations, comments, or questions in reply to this, so he continues, “I’d just spent the day shooting so I had my new revolver on my person. Due to the late hour and my lack of companions, I’d assembled it and placed it in my coat pocket as a precaution.”

Hamish regards the perfectly empty street around them; it’s well after the lunch hour. The neighborhood children have returned to their lessons and their mothers are likely enjoying tea. The men of the area are in the bustling city center, working hard at making their fortunes. There is no one except the woman on his arm and the man who will one day be her husband to hear his confession.

“There she was,” he rasps, recalling the sight of Iracebeth standing in the overgrown field, “laughing, utterly mad. My old gun was too big for her to wield easily and I’d just been practicing with its replacement only hours earlier and suddenly, the weapon was out of my pocket and in my hand, hammer drawn, aimed, and fired.” He lets out a long breath. “It should have been harder to do… shouldn’t it?”

Alice squeezes his arm reassuringly. “It is frighteningly easy to kill,” she agrees softly. “Once events are set in motion, the momentum carries you through the deed. I’m sorry you know what I’m talking about, Hamish.”

He frowns briefly, wondering why Alice would know what he means, but then he remembers: she’d slain a Jabberwocky, whatever that creature is. Or, rather, had been.

He pats her fingers upon his arm. “I’m sorry for both of us.” And then the conversation, brief though it had been, is over; they’ve arrived at their destination and Hamish refuses to speak of Underland here. This is a gentleman’s house; there is no room for such fantastic things within these mundane walls. Here he is only Lord Ascot and, for a short time, Alice Hightopp’s fictitious cousin.

“Here we are,” he announces, gesturing toward the correct house. “I hope you’ll let me know if I
can make your room more comfortable, Mister and Missus Hightopp.”

The guestroom is upstairs, but Alice stubbornly insists on climbing the steps herself (after making the acquaintance of Hamish’s butler, of course). She is leaning heavily on Hightopp by the time they enter their new room. Hamish notices the Hatter’s glance at the couch which is followed by a look of relief. Dear God, had the man actually believed that a fainting couch is capable of fainting?

“It’s a perfectly normal piece of furniture, Hightopp,” Hamish informs him as the Hatter helps Alice to the nearest chair. “I’ll fetch some blankets.” Eying Alice’s wan appearance, he adds, “And some refreshments.”

“Surely you have other business which demands your attention?” she asks, breathless from her exertions.

Hamish shakes his head. Last week, work had been a welcome distraction from simply waiting for Alice to conquer her illness. Now, however… “No, madam. I’m afraid you and your husband are obliged to endure my company for the remainder of today.”

“And here I am without a book to throw,” she replies with a brave attempt at a smile.

Hamish harrumphs to hide his grin.

The Hatter chuckles warmly.

Alice turns at the soft sound and studies the man’s face with such an expression of love that Hamish doesn’t bother to excuse himself from the room. Truly, with Tarrant Hightopp’s devoted gaze trained upon Alice, neither of them will notice if he leaves. In fact, he probably shouldn’t have closed the office at noon today; he could have gotten a bit more work done while Alice and the Hatter are busy being utterly enthralled with each other. Hamish sighs and takes his time putting together the tea service with a bit of assistance from his butler.

When he returns to the guestroom upstairs, Hamish is rather surprised and gratified to see both of his visitors clearly waiting for him. He sets the tea tray down upon the room’s small games table and the Hatter promptly gets to work sorting out cups and spoons.

“Hamish,” Alice begins, “where is your set of dominoes? What do you say we teach Tarrant how to trounce someone?”

The Hatter startles and squeaks a bit at that very sudden declaration. “Alice, I’ve no interest whatsoever in trouncing either you or Hamish.”

Enjoying the man’s nervous energy and Alice’s somewhat predatory smile far more than he probably should, Hamish confesses, “It’s in the study. I’ll only be a moment.” As he walks away from the Hatter’s continued protestations, Hamish smiles, glad he’d taken the day off today after all. Yes, very glad indeed.
It’s clear to Alice that Hamish is thinking about something. She has seen that consternated expression before and it does not bode well for his state of mind or temperament. Yes, whatever issue is currently nettling him must be quite serious.

Speaking up from her seat in the parlor’s floral patterned armchair, Alice announces, “We’d understand if you need to go to the office today to attend to business.”

Never mind that if Hamish were to cancel his part in their outing today, his departure would leave her completely alone with Tarrant, and what with her energy returning with startling force with each passing day (and she’s spent six of them as Hamish’s houseguest thus far), Alice is finding it more and more difficult to behave as a lady should Above.

Now that Tarrant’s heart is healed, she is more determined than ever before to win it through her merits. Unfortunately, she’s also rather impatient and wound tighter than McTwisp’s poor pocket watch. It is, Alice admits, a recipe for disaster; were she alone with Tarrant, were his twitchy hands and giggles at her disposal, were her restless energy given free reign… well, she’s positive of one thing: Hamish would not thank her for it should he walk in on an attempt at a romantic overture, either under his roof or in public.

Disturbingly, Alice has discovered that her inclination to make a lovesick fool of herself refuses to diminish one whit beyond these walls. In fact, it seems to redouble as if she is compelled to seek constant reassurance that, no matter the state of his affections, Tarrant still chooses her above all others.

Alice considers this trend with a small frown. She doesn’t like feeling so unbalanced. She shall have to make a concentrated effort to behave today as public is their destination. Just as soon as Tarrant finishes getting ready upstairs, he’ll join her and Hamish in the parlor and commence with the day’s itinerary (which she’s sure Hamish has a copy of in his jacket pocket).

“Hm?” he says, jerking his chin up as if just becoming aware of his surroundings. “What did you say, Cousin Alice?”

It’s a measure of her adaptability that she no longer feels the urge to roll her eyes at the fictitious familial title.

“I was saying: if you’d rather go into the office in order to wrestle with that monstrous conundrum which is clearly distracting you…”

“What? No,” he blusters. “I’m perfectly fine. Besides, there are no resources at the office which can assist me with this.”

Which means that the issue is private. Given the issues of late, she guesses that it likely concerns Iracebeth. She can understand his feelings of guilt and regret even as she’s thankful that the
woman will not be troubling Underland ever again.

Alice considers repeating her assurances to him, but she doubts he’s truly ready to hear them.

She sighs.

“The issue at hand,” Hamish surprisingly volunteers, although with noticeable reluctance, “concerns…”

“Yes?” she prompts, her curiosity rising to the fore, eager to take part in the blossoming discussion.

But, just then, just as Hamish opens his mouth to speak, a door opens upstairs and booted feet quickly stride toward the steps. Hamish pauses in his explanation and gives Alice a droll grin instead.

She bites back an oath. Her smile is genuine, however, when Tarrant breezes into the room on an apology and offers his hands to Alice. Truly, she doesn’t need assistance with rising from a perfectly comfortable armchair, but she adores having an excuse to touch him, to lean against him, to breathe in his scent and feel his natural warmth.

It’s just as well that Hamish clears his throat or Alice might have gotten a bit carried away. She arranges her hand on Tarrant’s arm (while he watches, beaming with eyes that are nearly aglow) and then announces, “Yes, I believe we are ready.”

“We relinquish the lead to you, sir,” Tarrant informs him.

“Hm,” Hamish grunts a bit grouchily. “No fiddle-faddle while my back is turned or I shall denounce ever having known the two of you.”

“We’ve been warned,” Alice acknowledges, smothering a grin.

“Strenuously and thoroughly,” Tarrant concurs brightly.

Only then does Hamish consent to begin the day’s outing.

They stroll sedately along the tree-lined street of Hamish’s neighborhood and although Hamish does not offer his arm to Alice, he remains close by. Alice directs their pace, tugging on Tarrant’s arm and gesturing to something that has caught her eye when she needs a moment to rest. Tarrant takes his cue and makes some remark to Hamish about the object of her attention and continues prompting their conversation until Alice feels ready to proceed again. This technique is especially applicable to Victoria City’s downtown as there is quite a lot to comment on.

It’s too early to try one of the adventurous-looking tea shops so they wander from store to store. At a fabric and notions emporium, Tarrant shows them how to test the integrity of a weave.

“Like so,” he demonstrates, stretching a length of fabric taut with one hand. He then flicks it smartly with his fingers and tilts his head to listen to vibrations. “Ah, not this one. It won’t hold a stitch for more than a week. Let’s try another. Alice? Here, ask this boisterous brocade.”

His arm brushes against hers as he reaches for a second bolt and the breeze which caresses her cheek smells like him and if it weren’t for Hamish’s boot scuffing against the toes of her shoes in the close quarters she might have forgotten herself.

Following Tarrant’s instructions and trying not to be distracted by his charming gestures and kissable smile, Alice thumps the taut fabric. Tarrant tilts his head toward the cloth in her hand and
“Did you hear that?” he asks, straightening.

Alice shakes her head, more than a little embarrassed with herself for being far more interested in how his lashes fan out across his cheekbones when he closes his eyes in concentration than what the fabric has to say.

“A much sturdier weave, this,” Tarrant informs them both. “I don’t suppose textiles concern your business?” This question is aimed at Hamish who seems to startle a bit at being included. Alice tries not to feel the stinging of her conscience. “If so, I would recommend this one for table cloths and curtains.”

Hamish reaches out for the indicated cloth. “May I?” he inquires and Alice passes it to him. She knows she ought to study the fabric with her “cousin” instead of shamelessly basking in Tarrant’s obvious mastery of his craft. Ought she feel proud of him for something which comes naturally after so many years of work?

As they move along in the cluttered shop, Hamish begins quizzing Tarrant on a wide variety of textile-related topics until Alice, jokingly, remarks, “Are you genuinely curious or are you considering offering Tarrant a job?”

The calculating and victorious gleam in Hamish’s eyes is not reassuring. Nor is his patently engineered cry of discovery and inspiration upon spying a photographer’s studio only a quarter of an hour later.

“Marvelous! Mister and Missus Hightopp, let’s have a photograph done to commemorate your visit!”

Alice, having never met a photographer before, shamelessly quizzes the man on his science as he bustles about setting up the scene for them. It’s a bit hard keeping an eye on Hamish’s self-satisfied grin while letting her curiosity get the better of her, but she consoles herself: Hamish would be suspicious if she weren’t curious. Besides, the close quarters again give her an excuse to crowd Tarrant who, rather gallantly, insists on keeping one warm hand at the small of her back for support, should she need it.

“There!” the photographer announces with such enthusiasm that his week-old beard seems to ripple, reminding her of the way the light had played upon the fur of the platypus who had conducted the orchestra at the White Queen’s celebratory ball. She recalls that occasion – the good and the bad: her first dance with Tarrant and his heartwarming promise to follow her lead; her attempt at a single harmless kiss which had been so utterly mortifying.

Alice refrains from mentioning the photographer’s possible likeness to a platypus. If the memory is bittersweet for her, she can only imagine how much more so it must be for Tarrant. For once in her life, she’d been early; propositioning him before she’d grown up and into her Underlandian citizenship. Thank goodness for the twitterpation!

“Now,” the photographer continues, interrupting Alice’s woolgathering, “if you’ll have a seat here, madam. And you, sir, stand just to the side of her chair…”

“What about Cousin Hamish?” Alice asks in a chipper tone, noting the way he seems to be doing his best to camouflage himself behind a tall, plaster urn molded in the Grecian style.

He startles. “Oh, no. This is my wedding present to the both of you!” he insists indulgently.

Alice decides she’d like to indulge a bit more, in that case, and presses, “But it simply wouldn’t
commemorate our visit here if you are absent."

The photographer leaps to accommodate an additional male in the composition. Grumbling, Hamish relents, “Fine, fine. Let’s just get on with it so we can take tea.”

And now that there’s a grumpy Hamish in her “wedding” photo, everything is perfect!

The photograph itself only requires that they three hold still for twenty seconds so Alice dares to smile softly despite the photographer’s warning that any facial expression whatsoever may become tiresome to maintain. She can’t turn in her seat to check, but she’s relatively certain that Tarrant is beaming recklessly and Hamish is doing his best to look like the stuffy lord he pretends to be.

Once the camera lens is capped and the glass plate removed (and subsequently handed to an assistant for processing), Hamish blusters his way toward the shop counter to pay. As Tarrant helps Alice stand, she tries not to let the fact that, yet again, she cannot reimburse Hamish for their expenses ruin the fine mood. Still, etiquette dictates that she mention it, and she knows how important etiquette is to an Ascot.

“Thank you for the photography sitting. I’m very sorry we cannot repay you—”

“Well,” he cuts her off as deftly as Cordwain might have. “It wasn’t only for you.”

“Yes, you’ve requested a copy for yourself as well, haven’t you?”

“Hm,” he replies vaguely, gesturing them toward his favorite tea shop. “Hightopp, have you ever had Jasmine tea?”

Alice listens to Tarrant’s response to that with only half an ear. At the moment, she’s rather busy noticing how Hamish’s eyes glint with mysterious purpose, a purpose Alice does not discover until the following evening at which time she’s torn between kissing him and kicking him soundly in the shin.

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Hamish has a plan, a rather good plan if he does say so himself. It would be nice to have Tarrant Hightopp’s cooperation but not necessary. He takes steps to investigate this when Alice has the surprisingly good sense to announce her intention to rest following their day in town.

“Hightopp, a word,” Hamish informs him once the door to the guestroom upstairs has shut.

The Hatter gives him a wry smile. “Another one? Just one?”

Hamish doesn’t even bother to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “Several, I’m afraid.”

“It bodes poorly if you’re already afraid at the onset of a conversation.”
Hamish snorts. Sometimes the man is almost amusing. He decides to get right to the point, otherwise Alice will be up and demanding dinner before Hightopp lets the conversation take a sensible course. “I need you to do something for Alice.”

“Name it,” the man replies with evident and admirable devotion.

Drawing in a steadying breath, Hamish asks, “What has she told you of her family?”

The Hatter stiffens, glances up, and – surprisingly – gasps out, “Alice has family?”

“Yes. A mother and a sister.” Hamish is sure he’s never seen Tarrant Hightopp look so utterly horrified. Even his renewed color fades a bit with his shock.

“She left them?”

“She chose you and Underland,” he corrects, startled by what Alice has clearly not spoken of with her future husband, “and recently, instances of abduction and vengeance exempted, I’ve begun to think that she made the right decision in leaving this dull world to make a new life in yours.”

The Hatter merely blinks, too stunned to speak. Hamish would have been entertained were they discussing any other topic.

“What I ask of you is to assist Alice with providing a measure of peace to her loved ones.”

“She… did not say goodbye to them?”

“Goodbyes, yes. Explanations? Not hardly.”

“What can I do?” the man inquires with reassuring determination and mental soundness.

“There is one thing, although you are under no obligation to comply.” Although, Hamish would be very surprised if the man does not leap at the opportunity he’s about to be offered. “I’d like to invite you to write a letter to Alice’s mother, Helen Kingsleigh, and Alice’s elder sister, Margaret Manchester, which I will happily post for you.”

Tarrant Hightopp frowns. “Write to them? Why not simply pay them a visit—?”

“Hightopp, you’ve no notion of geography, do you?” With a huff, Hamish informs him, “At present, we are a four-month journey by sea from Alice’s homeland and family.”

“Four months?”

“A hundred and twenty days.”

“Yes, yes, I know my sums,” the man barks hoarsely. He paces back and forth in the parlor, his outrageous brows drawn together in ferocious thought. After a long moment, the Hatter stops and declares, “I fully intend to ask Alice why she never mentioned her family to me.”

Hamish hopes the man will warn him beforehand; Hamish would rather not be present for that discussion as it’s bound to be terribly personal. “Best of luck.”

“And I will write those letters,” he additionally decides.

“Excellent. If you would like me to look them over for you, I’d be happy to do so. In any case, I shall also include a letter of my own. You’ll need an introduction and, in addition, an explanation for how I came to locate the both of you will be needful.”
“I am assuming,” Tarrant Hightopp says slowly, “that you will not be mentioning Underland in this note?”

“No. I am afraid some of the facts will have to be altered.”

“A pity. They lose their flavor rather quickly after that.”

Hamish simply has to ask: “What sort of flavor do unaltered facts have?”

“The ring of truth, of course!”

Hamish gives him a droll look. “That would be a sound.” If it were anything other than an abstract concept, that is.

“Tell that to the next bronze bell that crosses your path.”

In the interest of time and efficiency, Hamish concedes (for clearly there’s no winning a war of words against Tarrant Hightopp). He mutters, “I shall.”

The following afternoon, during his return home for the noontime meal, Hamish gives Tarrant Hightopp a copy of the promised letter. “Discuss it with Alice at your leisure,” he encourages the man and then retreats to his office in town. When he arrives home that evening, however—feeling quite accomplished with regards to the day’s work—he encounters a cacophony of cooking sounds coming from the kitchen down the hall and Alice waiting for him upon the stairs.

“You told Tarrant about my mother and sister.”

Closing the front door (and abandoning his briefly entertained thought of escape), Hamish sighs. “The question, Alice, is why didn’t you do so yourself earlier?”

“Because I didn’t know what to say,” she replies frankly. “This,” she continues holding up the copy of the letter he’d passed to her will-be husband only a few hours earlier, “is high-handed, presumptuous, and autocratic.”

Hamish refuses to back down in response to her glare. For a moment, they simply size each other up in the hallway like two lions eying the same fleet-footed gazelle.

And then Alice adds, a smile quirking the corners of her mouth upward, “It is also needful, inspired, and brilliant.”

“So you approve.”

“I notice that wasn’t a question.”

Of course not! Hamish is determined to send his letter off along with a copy of the photograph they’d had taken yesterday, approval given or no! “Your mother needs closure.”

“Yes, she does. You might have discussed this with me before orchestrating this story.” Again she indicates the letter, waving it to and fro this time.

“When have you ever been sensible on this topic?” he retorts. “I’ve lost count of the number of times I asked you to go home so that your mother’s mind might be put at ease, and every blasted time you—”

“If you’d proposed something sensible, I would have agreed! I’m not so petty as to turn aside a good solution out of spite.”
“No, you’re not. You’re quite right. I underestimated your ability to be reasoned with.”

“Hamish…!” She huffs out a laugh. “You make me mad enough to swear sometimes.”

“And yet you hold back.”

“Don’t ask me why.” Alice shakes her head ruefully. “So, in summary: according to you, I met Tarrant in London, fell in love, eloped, and ran away to China to start anew, where you ran into us one day by chance.”

Hamish doesn’t criticize the over-simplification of his letter to Helen. He asks instead, “Do you think she’ll believe it?”

“I think she’ll want to believe it. And, with the photograph included, there will be no reason for her not to. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“I don’t doubt that it is. You look awfully pleased with yourself, Cousin Hamish.”

“And as you already know the cause, I won’t have to restrain myself,” he informs her, puffing up his own chest showily.

She barks out a laugh. “Be careful. Any more hot air and we’ll strap a carrier basket to you and go flying.”

“I recall you used to be curious about that very notion.”

“Using you as a hot-air balloon?”

“Flying.”

She blinks and then a warm smile curves her lips. “Ah, yes. You remember.”

“I never forget a quadrille.”

Alice casts her gaze heavenward. “I’ve been immortalized in a monotonous country dance. Wonderful.”

“How will you explain your disappearance?” Hamish inquires abruptly. He’d rather not let her maneuver him into defending a dance he’s always found quite invigorating. Sometimes, rules can be a comfort rather than a cage. The only way to get Alice to leave one topic is to dare her to be brilliant with regards to another.

She smiles wryly. “I don’t mention it, actually. Perhaps it’s cruel of me to let her think that her mind played a trick upon her, but…”

“Yes, explaining it would only invite criticism and unanswerable questions.”

“ Exactly.”

“How is your shoulder?”

“Nearly ready for the looking glass.”

“The looking glass?”
“Yes, that’s how Tarrant says he arrived this time and he seems to think that’s how we’ll be returning.”

“I’ve never found myself in Underland through a looking glass,” he cautions her.

“So I’m to be surprised then? Well, I think I’m ready for that as well.” She stands and informs him, “Tarrant and I took the liberty of giving your butler the night off. Dinner should be ready by the time you’ve refreshed yourself and then we’ll see if you and I can beat Tarrant at dominoes.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Cousin Alice,” he informs her.

Smiling, she heads for the kitchen where Hamish hears someone – Hightopp he now realizes – banging about. As Hamish climbs the stairs to the second floor, his heart aches a bit with every step, but it also seems to grow stronger as well. Yes, he will miss Alice, his friend, and yes, he envies the life she will build and the companionship she will enjoy, but he consoles himself with knowing both where she is going and that it truly is a better place.

Chapter End Notes

+ Yes, the game of Dominoes was around in the Victorian Era.

+ From the 1850s onward, one of the most popular photography methods was the Daguerreotype which required a 10-60 second exposure on a glass plate negative (rather than a film negative). This exposure time was vastly improved from the 3-15 minute exposure time needed two decades earlier. Also, photographers were considered as something similar to a scientist rather than an artist. It would be decades before photographs were considered to be “art.”
Chapter 23

Alice had told Hamish the truth: her shoulder was much improved. She’d gone to see Doctor Wellington the day before to have the stitches removed and although her range of movement remains limited and she must endure a continuing ache-ish twinge, she is fine.

“You know,” Alice tells him as she stands with Tarrant in the house parlor. They’d stayed up late last night, talking and playing dominoes and even drinking a bit. Despite the friendly and open atmosphere the night before, Alice hadn’t spoken her mind. Not all of it. “I fully expect to see you again very soon, Hamish.”

“Yes, yes,” the Hatter concurs. “Do drop in!”

“But when you do…” Alice begins.

“Don’t forget the Upelkuchen!” Tarrant Hightopp concludes.

“Don’t forget to announce yourself,” Alice corrects him with a teasing shake to his arm and a laughing smile in response to the rhyme.

“Let’s not become maudlin,” Hamish retorts stiffly. Alice knows this is due to an overabundance of emotion rather than any intentional aloofness on his part. “Get yourselves back to where you came from and look after that shoulder.”

“I will!” Alice says with exasperation just as Tarrant echoes the same words in a warm and tender tone.

She glances toward him and he at her. She feels his hand lift from the small of her back to gently brush against her shoulder which is no longer supported by a sling beneath her capelet. Her right hand finds his and their fingers entwine.

“Are ye ready, mae Alice?” he burrs softly.

Seeing only him, she nods. Then, taking a deep breath, she turns back toward their host to bid him farewell: “Goodbye, Cousin Ha—!”

But Hamish is not standing where she’d last seen him. Or, rather, she and Tarrant are no longer standing where they’d once been. Before them, the White Queen’s castle glistens in the sunlight. The blossoming trees which line the long drive wave their branches in the breeze.

“No wonder Hamish always seemed so discombobulated,” Alice remarks as she blinks at the sight before her. She’d expected to return directly to Iplam but she can’t find it in her to be disappointed by this turn of events. Still, it’s quite a shock.

Tarrant remarks, “It’s easy to be discombobulated without a hat to shade your eyes.”

Given the reflective properties of white stone, Alice supposes that must be true. “I don’t have any hats,” she remarks idly.
Tarrant draws in a breath. “Would you like one?”

Smiling, she opens her mouth to reply favorably; she sees the way Tarrant’s green eyes begin to glow with anticipation and something more—

“Alice! Hatta!”

Alice startles and glances toward the depths of the castle gardens, shading her eyes. Movement along one of the narrower, cobblestone paths which winds between the blossoming trees draws her gaze and Alice watches the queen and three ladies emerge. The women seem happy enough to see her and Tarrant, but Alice suspects they’re rather miffed at having their stroll with the queen interrupted.

At Alice’s side, Tarrant replies brightly, “Yes, yes, your Majesty! I am a hatter again.”

The White Queen nods once in apology to her companions – excusing herself – and then drifts gradually toward Alice and Tarrant. Gently, she chides him, “I’m sure you will be again very soon. You’ve your heart on your sleeve, my friend.”

“Where I wear it with pride.”

“As well you should,” the White Queen praises and Alice can’t help but agree. A heart as magnificent as his ought to be shown off.

Mirana comes to a halt in front of Alice and holds out her hands which Alice clasps in friendship despite the stretch making her left shoulder twinge.

“It’s so good to see you again, Alice.”

“Thank you. It’s good to be back.” She thinks of Hamish and finds herself momentarily saddened on his behalf. It is so very unfair that Alice can easily visit with the queen, whom he’d been visibly taken with. But she consoles herself that Hamish will be back someday. Underland hasn’t seen the last of him, she’s sure.

“I’m sensing a deep and lingering would, my champion,” the White Queen continues, her dark brows drawing together with concern. “Are you certain you’re perfectly well?”

She senses the shift in Tarrant’s attention as he studies her worriedly. She considers white lying, but Mirana quirks a brow at her and holds up a single finger in warning as if she can sense Alice’s very thoughts. She sighs and admits, “It does ache a bit…”

She thinks of the sling she’d reluctantly included in the satchel Tarrant carries (which also contains a framed copy of the photograph they’d posed for with Hamish and Tarrant’s Underlandian clothing). She hadn’t wanted to bring the blasted thing at all much less put it on again but perhaps she should.

The White Queen, however, has another idea. “Follow me to the kitchens, Alice. Let us see what we can do about your shoulder. If you’ll excuse us, Hatta?”

“Yes. Oh, yes. I’ve much to catch up to.”

Alice glances at him, wondering at the barely contained glee in his smile.

“Shall we, Alice?” Mirana invites.

It occurs to Alice that, for the first time in weeks, she and Tarrant are parting ways, seeing to
different errands and attending to separate agendas. She doesn’t really care for the thought much, but Tarrant brushes his fingertips against her cheek and nods, urging her to go on.

Well, it’s not as if she can refuse an invitation from the queen. Not without a very good reason, at least! Alice manufactures a smile. “Yes, of course, your Majesty.”

The queen leads them both up the steps to the castle and into the grand and glowing entryway. As they come abreast of the corridor leading to Tarrant’s former workshop, warm fingers tickle hers briefly. Glancing to the side, she catches Tarrant’s parting grin which is filled with warmth. She watches him stride purposefully in the direction of his old workstation, clearly eager to be getting on with some project or other. Perhaps a hat.

The queen shows Alice along a familiar corridor which reminds her of the last time she’d been in need of a potion and the person they’d discussed at that time.

“I’m very sorry about Iracebeth,” Alice offers softly.

“As am I, dear Alice,” Mirana responds on a sorrowful whisper, “but she chose her path.”

That she had. “Hamish also sends his condolences.”

“That’s very thoughtful of him. How is Sir Hamish?”

Alice is sure she isn’t imagining the vitally interested note in the woman’s tone. “Blustery,” Alice informs her with a wry smile. “A bit pompous but surprisingly generous… and deeply concerned that you no longer hold him in high regard.”

“Ah,” she muses. “From Tarrant’s letter – he briefly mentioned a timely intervention and Hamish taking you Above for immediate care – I gather he must have had some involvement in what happened at Iplam.”

Unsure of whether she ought to confirm or deny that, Alice says nothing.

Mirana blinks against the tears shimmering in her dark eyes. “I do hope he’ll give me the chance to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Alice echoes, startled.

“Yes. She was my sister, after all. I feel dreadful that she wounded you and forced his hand.”

“It would be a great comfort to him if he could hear you say so, your Majesty.”

“I’ve tried,” she confides, drifting to a halt in front of the kitchen door. On a sigh, she explains, “He seems determined to stay Above. He has ignored every invitation I’ve given him to step, sit, stand, or sprawl into Underland.”

Thinking of the solution to her own conundrum concerning her mother and sister, Alice proposes, “Perhaps a letter…?”

The queen brightens. “Perhaps!” Gesturing toward the door, she inquires, “Are you ready to brave today’s soup?”

“I think I can manage to duck and cover.”

Luckily, Thackery is in the midst of baking which provides far fewer dangerous projectiles than, say, roasting or simmering. “Th’ buns ‘r’ outteh th’oven!” he announces, tossing an assortment in
Alice’s direction. She sidesteps one, ducks another, and catches a third still steaming bun in her hands. She wraps it in a handkerchief to share with Tarrant later. Around her, small birds dive down from the rafters – swallows by the look of their long, forked tails – and indulge in an impromptu feast of fallen bread.

“It’s good to see you again,” Alice greets the March Hare.

In response, he stomps back over to the counter and begins banging apples and wooden cups about. “No distractions!” he orders. “No right-side-up-not-down cake!”

Leaving him to it, Alice follows Mirana over to a familiar table laden with still-strange ingredients. She seats herself on the bench opposite the queen and watches as she surveys her supplies, twirls her fingers in a gesture that might be meant for calculating dosage, and then gets to work.

“Now, although they are a bit late in coming,” Mirana begins in a chipper tone, “I believe congratulations are in order.”

“They are?”

Mirana gives her a knowing smile. “Tarrant looks himself again. It’s plain to see that you’ve healed him, Alice. Thank you.”

Uncomfortable with the praise, she tries to express the lack of choice she’d had in the matter; she simply hadn’t been able to bear the thought of him continuing to endure as he had been! “I had to try—”

“No,” the queen corrects her kindly. Alice can barely hear her over the racket Thackery currently is making with a tin water kettle. “No, you had to succeed, which you did. And well before the completion of your handfasting.”

Alice lets out a breath in relief.

“Although that’s not to say the two of you would have been obliged to dissolve the union had you not succeeded within the year-and-a-day. You might have decided to stay paired despite his broken heart and that would have been entirely your choice, dear. Even with a broken heart, it was clear how happy you made him and how devoted he was to you, Alice.”

“Still,” Alice replies around the sudden lump in her throat, “I’m glad things haven’t worked out that way.”

“Yes. I am as well.”

Alice doesn’t mention the last obstacle to be overcome: the earning of his love. Even if she doesn’t manage it within the remainder of the handfasting, it’s likely Tarrant will still choose to share his life with her. Really, there’s no rush.

That’s what she tells herself, anyway.

Seeking a new topic, Alice remarks abruptly as the queen plucks a buttered finger from a glass canister merely for the purpose of savoring its bouquet before replacing it, “While your skills in potionry are terribly interesting and much appreciated, I’m afraid all this—” Her gesture is meant to encompass the table, its burden, and its lady-brewer. “—might be a bit unsettling for Hamish, should you ever invite him to watch you work.”

“Alchemy unsettles me as well,” Mirana remarks serenely. “Such is its very nature: it unsettles
that which is and resettles it into that which we wish it to be. Hardly a comfortable process.”

Alice supposes that makes sense. Warning dutifully discharged, she asks in a teasing tone, “Is that a tactful way of saying the potion you’re brewing for my shoulder will be unpleasant to drink?”

“No at all!” the woman argues. “You mustn’t assume that all unsettling things are an evil, Alice.”

Again, Alice has nothing to say in response to the White Queen’s Underlandish wisdom.

As the occasional bird dives over the table, playing in the strange, green smoke hissing from the crucible (the contents of which Alice is happily ignorant), she speaks of other things: Jasmine tea, photographs, and dominoes.

“There,” Mirana announces suddenly. With a twirl and a bit of a curtsey, she spoons out a measure of potion and offers the well-used ladle to Alice over the cluttered table. Just like before when Alice had overindulged on Upelkuchen, she blows and sips. This time, rather than scrambling to keep her shrinking self within her increasingly overlarge dress, she sighs with relief as a pleasant warmth blooms within her left shoulder, leaving the muscles relaxed and resilient.

“Thank you,” she breathes. “My shoulder feels lovely now.” She even tests that statement by stretching her arm this way and that, noting the absence of any pain whatsoever.

“Don’t thank me quite yet,” the queen sing-songs as she decants a dram of the remaining potion into a glass vial. “For later,” she explains, presenting it to Alice.

“Er, later?”

“Yes, dear. You may find a use for it should you encounter another deep ache which interferes with things.”

Alice blinks at her, not comprehending.

The White Queen smiles. “If you don’t already know to what I’m referring, then you likely will in due time. When will you be returning to your home with Tarrant?”

The abrupt change of topic makes Alice feel a little dizzy. “Er, as soon as he’s ready, I suppose.”

“In that case, let us locate him. He finished his work not long ago.”

“How can you tell?”

“Oh… a little bird told me,” she answers with a glance up. Alice follows her gaze and watches the family of swallows swoop and dive and circle their wattle-and-daub nest in the rafters. “Their droppings are the key ingredient in Upelkuchen,” Mirana confides.

Alice rather wishes she hadn’t.

They find Tarrant seated on a bench in the entryway, fiddling nervously with a hatbox on his lap. When he hears their footsteps, his anxious expression vanishes. He smiles, stands, and holds out a hand to Alice, which she happily takes.

“All in one piece now, love?” he teases softly.

“Quite. Being hole-y is thoroughly inconvenient.”

“For many things,” the White Queen contributes on a delicate cough.
Interestingly, this causes Tarrant to blush slightly. Alice would have loved to investigate that flush a bit, but she spares him. She won’t tease him in front of the queen but later, when it’s just the two of them again, oh yes the gloves will come off!

“Tarrant, I was thinking,” she begins, drawing his attention back to her and away from the thought which heats his face.

“A marvelous activity,” he agrees.

She grins helplessly in reply. “Would you be willing to let the White Queen look after the keepsake from our visit Above?”

With a smile, he nods once and places the satchel upon the bench for her.

“That’s very kind of you, Alice, Hatta, but you needn’t—”

“We’d like to,” Alice insists, drawing out the framed photograph from the bag. Yes, it seems only right that if one copy of this image is being sent to her mother, who misses her and worries about her, then this one ought to go to Mirana so that she will be able to keep company with her Sir Hamish, after a fashion.

The White Queen gasps when Alice holds out the photograph for her to take. As Alice had predicted at the time, Tarrant had dared a wide, happy grin while Hamish had adopted a properly stoic – even haughty – expression. Still, she knows what sort of man lives behind that façade and, from the queen’s teary eyes, she does as well.

“Would you look after it for us?” Alice asks. “Until…?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Cradling the image gently in her arms, Mirana whispers, “Thank you, my friends.”

As she and Tarrant depart the castle and begin the journey home, Alice muses that perhaps everything had happened for a reason: Alice had been meant to find Underland when she’d been a child; she’d been fated to return and to stay; Hamish had been destined to try to reason with her until he’d met the queen and finally found a woman he truly fancied; Alice had been meant to go Above with Tarrant, which means she’d been meant to be shot and Hamish had been meant to rescue her and, therefore, Iracebeth had been fated to seek revenge for Stayne’s death and Alice had been destined to be captured by the man in the first place and…

Like a game of dominoes, if even a single piece in this puzzle had been removed, then she might not be walking on the road to Iplam now with Tarrant’s hand holding hers. She might not be going home with the man who’d nearly asked her to be his wife.

Her heart races as she wonders if he’ll finish asking that question now.

But this is not the time or the place for that discussion. “Did you play in these woods as a child?” she asks him instead, and then listens to the sound of his voice as he opens the old, tattered book of his past to her. And when he asks after her childhood, she replies just as freely. He already knows she’d left her family to live here and be with him, but – more than that – she believes he understands that she’d left her family in order to be herself: Alice Alishin, the shoemaker, the former champion, and the daughter of Charles Kingsleigh.

“It’s good to be home,” she sighs happily as Tarrant opens the front door to their unpainted house and she steps over the threshold. She removes her boots beside the door, placing a hand on Tarrant’s arm to steady herself as she does so, and then she heads for the bedroom with the satchel they’d brought with them. As she passes through the parlor, she peeks into the kitchen; someone
had been by and cleaned up the uneaten soup and done the washing up, for which she’s thankful.

As the satchel mostly contains Tarrant’s things (namely, the clothes he’d been wearing that night when Iracebeth had come seeking vengeance), she sets it down beside the wardrobe for him to sort out later. She then simply stands and surveys the bedroom itself. She sees Tarrant’s top hat upon the chest of drawers and his collection of handkerchiefs looped over the railing of the wooden headboard of the bed. Yes, he has clearly made himself at home in this room, their room.

Taking a deep breath, Alice tests herself in silence, imagines sharing this bed with him, and discovers that she is ready for that.

“Alice?”

“Hm?” She turns toward the sound of his voice and studies him as he hesitates on the threshold of the room. He’d abandoned the hatbox and now holds only the hat itself in his grasp. She gives him a questioning look and, taking a deep breath, he lifts it up for her inspection.

“It’s beautiful,” she tells him truthfully. She’s never seen a more handsome lady’s top hat. The base color is a dark, deep blue and the band an assortment of ribbons all intertwined to create an effect similar to the colors of Tarrant’s new shoes. A single hat pin, which looks remarkably similar to the Vorpal Sword (only in miniature), had been thrust into the ribbons on the right-hand side. Seeing that, Alice suddenly knows with certainty that this hat is meant for her. And, in the wake of that realization, comes yet another: Tarrant has been planning to make her this hat for some time. Perhaps that’s partly why he’d offered to wash her hair all those weeks ago: so that he could measure her for this very hat. He’d merely been waiting to be healed – to be capable of love – before attempting to create it.

Alice boggles, utterly stunned by his confidence. He’d been so sure that he’d love her just as soon as he was able to, and yet she had never let herself imagine that winning his love would be that easy, that simple, that swift.

But it had been. He’d loved her Above; he’d loved her even before the fever had stolen days from her; perhaps he’d loved her upon the porch that moonlit night…

“Woul’ ye… try it on?” he requests shyly.

Smiling, Alice ignores the aching-pounding of her own heart and bargains, “Only if you promise not to get twitterpated again.”

He giggles nervously. “Oh, no! No, no! That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I’ve already had it.”

“We’ve both already had it,” she retorts wryly, recalling how worried she’d been for him.

His smile calms and widens, stretching with whatever emotion his whole-and-healthy heart is producing. He steps forward. Alice lowers her head accommodatingly, and then he places the hat upon her crown.

She would have made a remark about how this moment is a mirror of the one in which she’d held his new shoes steady as he’d put them on for the first time. She’s sure he would have appreciated the observation. But words – even the very thoughts which had inspired them – are stolen away by the sudden and inescapable feeling of… of… him enveloping her completely.

She gasps, sways under the onslaught of such aching warmth, such eternal comfort, and such blossoming light. “This… this is…!” she rasps, her fingers curling and digging into his shirtsleeves. She likes that he seems to prefer going about without a vest or jacket in their home,
but the opinion will have to wait for another time. At the moment, all she can seem to say – to think – is: “It’s made with love.”

“Aye,” he replies gently, his hands grasping her elbows to steady her. “I luv ye, Alice. Mae heart is yers.”

Alice struggles to form a coherent thought. Her pulse races and her heart pounds and, dear Underland, she’s never felt anything like this before. After a long moment, during which she spares a thought for his reaction to stepping into his new shoes for the first time – his frantic pacing and the tears trembling upon his lashes as he’d grasped her hands on the threshold of Cordwain’s shop – Alice reaches for him and places a hand over his heart.

“Keep it safe for me?” she asks him.

He nods once and then, taking her other hand and pressing her palm to his chest beside the first, he covers her hands with his own and asks, “Will ye stay wi’ me always, where’er we gae? Will ye gi’e me a lifetime wi’ ye, Alice, as yer mate an’ yer friend? As yer par’ner in aul things? Will ye accept mae luv an’ gehd effor’s teh gi’e ye aul I can?”

She nods frantically. “Yes,” she answers on a thread of breath. “And will you…? Am I—am I enough? Good enough—?”

He leans down and kisses her into silence. Alice’s fingers curl against his shirt and her heart thunders as he gently but insistently nudges her lips apart and, for the first time, tastes her deeply. She anchors herself to him despite the fact that she’s sure the room is quite steady. It is she who is spinning, falling, breaking and being remade. Kissing so passionately and thoroughly, it feels as if they’ve never been closer, never been so united or intertwined.

A raven and a writing desk, she realizes suddenly, that’s what we are. Two vastly different creatures who, in sharing each other, have become one.

[Interlude]

NOTES:

+ The Interlude immediately follows Alice’s POV scene. Be warned, though. It is rated M for sexual situations, including an awkward first time, sexy-as-all-hell-o!Hatter, and a what-is-this-I-don’t-even!Alice. (^__~) To skip the Interlude, just hit the “Next Chapter” link at the top a second time. P.S. The Interlude is an epic 7100 words in length. It’s possibly the longest single lovemaking scene I’ve ever written. Not sure if I should be proud of that or not…

*~*~*~*

One moment, Alice and Tarrant Hightopp had been standing in Hamish’s parlor; one moment, he’d been bossily ordering Alice to look after herself and Hightopp had been more or less swearing an oath to do that very thing; one moment, Hamish’d had two guests for Sunday brunch. One moment, the house had seemed full to bursting with laughter… and then, in less than
a tick from the clock on the wall, it is utterly empty.

The void of silence presses in on Hamish’s ears, making them ring uncomfortably. He swallows against a rising tide of unsettling emotion and then he sighs. The sound is too thin to fill up the room let alone the house.

A soft knock on the door startles him. “Yes?”

“Pardon me, sir, but will you and your guests be going out this afternoon?” the butler inquires.

Hamish blinks at the man and then unsticks his tongue from the roof of his mouth to say, “I’ll be going out—” For what would be the good in lingering here in this empty house today? “—but Mister and Missus Hightopp have already departed for their home.”

“Oh, I see. Very well, sir. I shall tidy up the guestroom.”

Hamish gives him leave to do so despite the sentimental urge to keep that room just as it is, to prove that two of Underland’s residents had truly been here, to reaffirm the fact that Hamish’s two very good friends are not imaginary. It’s a ridiculous notion and Hamish hies away to the office in order to bury it beneath paperwork.

He returns home late, drinks a glass of brandy alone, ignores the set of dominoes sitting on the parlor table, and then retires for the night.

The next morning, Hamish gathers up the letters and the photograph. He adroitly addresses the package to Helen Kingsleigh and then stops by the post office on his way to work. As the parcel passes out of his hand and into the clerk’s, Hamish experiences a moment of loss, as if his part in some grand adventure has been completed. He does his best to ignore the feeling entirely.

Arriving at the company trade office, Hamish opens the door, greets the front desk clerk, and strides toward his office. He reaches out, grasps the door knob, opens the door and—!

“Good gracious!” he barks quite abruptly, startling the clerk in the lobby.

“Sir?” the man inquires, the legs of his chair stuttering and scraping across the wooden floor as he hastily stands.

Hamish doesn’t notice. He stares, heart pounding, and the streak of dark fur which had erupted from his office and is now gracefully loping toward the front door of the building. Hamish watches as the creature – a grey tabby cat – pauses and studies him with its luminous blue-green eyes. For a moment, their gazes lock. And then the beast’s mouth stretches into a knowing and toothy grin.

Before Hamish can gather his wits, the animal pivots around and – impossibly! – strolls right through the closed door.

“Sir, are you all right?” the clerk checks, poking his head into the shadowed hallway.

“I… yes. It’s nothing,” Hamish responds, not even bothering to ask if the man had seen the cat at all. But Hamish knows that he himself had seen it and this is not the first time he has encountered the creature.

With a nod to the clerk, Hamish nervously steps into his office. He hangs up his coat and hat. He props his walking stick up against the extra chair beside the door. Only then, after indulging in a deep breath, does he turn around and dare to look at his desk.
Upon the polished surface, which he had cleared of all parchment, paper, and other items the evening before, Hamish discovers a single letter. Stepping up to the edge of the desk, he reaches out and gingerly picks it up. In the upper left corner of the envelope, he sees a familiar crest, one he’d noticed on the napkins and embossed upon the silverware at the White Queen’s castle in Underland. And in the center of the letter, he reads his own name written in flowery script:

Sir Hamish of Above

The envelope trembles in his grasp. She has written to him. She…!

_Mirana!

His heart pounds anew. What he wouldn’t give to read her words, to enjoy the dips and curls of her handwriting which must be as graceful as she. What he wouldn’t give to be a man worthy of receiving so fine a gift.

But he is not worthy.

“I’ve killed…” he informs the envelope quietly. “I’m sorry.”

He places the letter back upon the desk and presses a hand to the jacket pocket over his heart in which her favor still rests. Perhaps someday he will be a man of enough merit to open this and read her letter. Perhaps one day, after he has atoned.

But that day is not today and forgiveness is but a dream upon a far distant horizon.

Hamish slides the letter into the only still-unused drawer in his desk, which he then shuts and locks. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and grasps the key in his hand tightly. No, he is not ready to believe himself to be a man worthy of Mirana’s affections, but he has hope now that she will wait until he is.

He tucks the key into the pocket with her handkerchief, lets out deep breath, and reaching for the contract he’d drafted the evening before, he gets on with his work.
“Alice,” Tarrant whispers against her skin, pressing tiny butterfly kisses to her neck and jaw as she sinks down blindly and sits on the edge of the bed. *Their* bed.

She shivers. Her stiff posture relaxes until she’s leaning against him for support. The bed beneath her does not feel intimidating, as it once had. Rather, it feels welcoming. Or, perhaps, it is she who now welcomes it.

Alice sighs as his fingertips trail across her cheek and he gently cups her face in his palm. She leans into his touch, closes her eyes, and reaches for the buttons on her blouse. Tarrant doesn’t seem to sense this development – well, how could he with his breath tickling the tender skin below her ear and his beautiful eyes likely squeezed shut? – but when she moves to shrug out of the garment, he leans back. His expression is wary, as if gauging her mood, but his eyes widen when she drops the blouse to the floor beside the bed.

She feels horridly exposed with only her shrift and no corset covering her, but she refuses to cross her arms. Instead, she grasps the quilt beneath her hands, fisting her fingers into the material. “Tarrant…?” she asks when his silent staring has gone on far too long.

His gaze jerks upward to her face, his lips move but, for a moment, no sound emerges. “You needn’t—” he begins.

“You love me,” she reminds him despite the fact that she is still wearing the hat he’d made for her. “I want…”

“What?” he burrs softly, his hands ghosting down her bare arms to her wrists which he clasps gently. “What d’ye wan’ t’nigh’, mae Alice?”

She closes her eyes as her heart flutters and the blood races and spins in her veins. Perhaps she does not want to make a child with him tonight – *No, no; it’s too soon!* – but how can she explain that she only wants— “You,” she whispers, her eyes still closed. “Just you.”

He leans closer and she startles when his tongue quickly flicks her earlobe. “Jus’ this?” he confirms. “Jus’ teh learn…?”

She nods quickly. “Yes. Just to learn.”

“Nae bairns,” he promises softly, nuzzling behind her ear as he lifts her hands from the quilt. “Jus’ learnin’…”
“For now,” she breathes, reaching for his shoulders.

Tarrant’s soft moan of agreement makes her fingers curl and clutch at the yoke of his shirt. His hands travel teasingly along her arms to her shoulders, trail down her back to the fastenings of her skirt. “Auwur learnin’,” he brogues, his nose tracing the line of her neck as he works through the buttons, “gaes twine ways, mae Alice. Ye’ll haf’teh show me whot ye like.”

She nods dumbly, not even truly comprehending the words, only begging for the sound of his voice to continue so deeply and darkly, softly and surely.

He presses hot, quick kisses to her neck and across her collarbone. Just a bit further down, her heart pounds. He must be able to hear it, feel it against his lips. But then his lips are on hers and her new hat is being lifted from her head as she falls backward under the hot pressure of his mouth. In the darkness behind her closed eyelids, her world becomes the taste of him, the sweeping touch of his tongue, and the feel of his warmth pressing against her chest.

Tarrant pulls back, whispers her name, and guides one of his hands from the line of her jaw down to where her heart is nearly tumbling within her chest. She opens her eyes, watches him watching her as he slowly moves his palm lower. It’s too slow, she decides and arches purposefully into his hand. He gasps helplessly and, for a moment, time stops. And then his perfectly healed thumb brushes once over her breast and she becomes the one who is gasping and helpless.

Her fists tighten in the fabric of his shirt, holding on as he leans over her, as his warm hand smooths down to her hip and then up her side. She wiggles against him when he approaches her chest again and Alice curves her back, lifts her breasts in invitation.

“Please,” she breathes, staring into his evergreen eyes.

He lowers his head just as his thumb once more passes over that aching flesh. She can only hold on and gulp her next breath while he caresses her there and his lips move down the column of her throat and over her heart and then—!

“Ah!” It would have been a cry if she’d only had the breath to voice it. She feels her hips jerk once at the feel of Tarrant nuzzling against the underside of her breast through the thin fabric. He lifts his chin and nips at her with his lips. Utterly destroyed by this, she is barely aware of his touch moving – shivering only as his thumb caresses her once more – down her body again. It’s not until a warm hand begins sliding up her thigh beneath her skirt – where had her skirt gone? – that uncertainty begins to overwhelm her. She thinks to shift, to shrink into the bed. His mouth is still upon her breast – plucking and kneading and so warm and urgent! – and now his calloused fingers journey upward, leaving burning, tingling trails in their wake and she cannot withstand these sensations!

“Tarrant!” she calls, alarmed by the painful pounding of her own heart and the restless movements of her hips and the aching of her breasts. “Tarrant!”

Somehow, her desperate plea for him to give her respite is taken as a demand for more instead. His hand glides purposefully between her thighs and his fingertips brush against her there.

“No!” she gasps, now pulling at his shirt and then pushing at his shoulders when she feels his touch venture just inside her!

“Stop! Stop!” She flinches away from him, frightened by herself, frightened of herself!

He pauses and, panting, looks up at her through disheveled brows. “Alice? Whot—?”

She squirms a bit more and his hand retreats back down her leg a few inches. Alice pauses, still
bracing her hands against his shoulders, and simply breathes.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, holding completely still. “Woul’ ye like me teh stop?”

Alice returns his gaze, her grasp alternately tightening and loosening upon his shoulders. “I don’t… I don’t know. It’s confusing.”

“Confusing?” he presses.

“Frightening,” she clarifies. “I’ve never… I never knew… No one ever said…”

Tarrant’s eyes close and he sighs in understanding. Beneath the hem of her shift, his hand pets her thigh softly. “Och, ye’re… ye’ve never… Sa’e me,” he softly swears. He doesn’t remove his hand from her, for which she’s glad. If he were to withdraw completely, she would have felt beyond terrified. His warmth and nearness, as unsettling and unnerving as it is, is the only thing grounding her to her own skin.

Opening his eyes, which are no longer quite so dark with desire, he apologizes, “I’m tae fast f’r yer first. I’m sorry, Alice.”

“Too fast?” she checks. “So you feel… pleasure? Your heart doesn’t—doesn’t—?”

Upon her thigh, his hand moves in a small, circular caress, encouraging her to continue.

Closing her eyes, Alice forces out the words. “Your heart doesn’t pound until you think it’s about to explode?”

He leans back, slowly removing his hand from her leg. “Aye, it does. Feel it,” he invites, gathering one of her hands from his shoulder and moving it down until her palm is pressed against his chest.

Alice bites her lip at the warmth and solidity she feels beneath her hand. She wonders briefly if he is as sensitive here as she is and, experimentally, moves her hand lower until she feels the hardened peak of his nipple tickle her palm.

“Alice!” he breathes sharply, his fingers tightening around her wrist but not pulling her hand away. No, he is holding her there. Beneath her fingertips, his heart pounds. Against her palm, his peaked flesh brushes against her through the thin fabric of his shirt. Under her hand, his breath heaves with impassioned pants.

“That doesn’t hurt you?” she asks, performing a circular caress similar to the one he’d given her thigh.

“Nay,” he whines, gritting his teeth. “’Tis sae gehd, Alice.”

She can see that it is. She can also see from his strained expression, how badly he wants more, how desperately he seeks relief. Perhaps… perhaps she could give him that? Perhaps, if she could just see how he survives it then she might feel braver about her own passion?

Rising up on one elbow, she glides her hand over to the buttons of his shirt. “I could…” Her words dry up into dust motes, so her fingers fiddle gently with the fastenings in an attempt to complete the offer with meaningful silence.

“Aye,” he sighs, closing his eyes and leaning back onto the mattress completely. “Woul’ ye?”

She swallows at the sight of his eyes which are darkening once more into that green which makes
her own breath shorten. “Yes,” she promises and, leaning forward, releases the first button from its hole.

Tarrant’s chest heaves beneath her touch as she fumbles with his shirt fastenings, his breath coming quicker the closer she gets to the waist of his trousers. When the last of the visible buttons have been undone, she looks back up into his eyes. She raises her hand, hovers it just above the center of his chest, marvels at the heat she can feel rising off of his skin.

He closes his eyes and arches into her touch. Alice’s pulse spikes at his sharply indrawn breath, at the feel of his skin, at the expanse of his body laid out for her to explore. And explore she does. Using his own caresses as reference, she palms his muscled breast, passes her thumb over it back and forth, feels him shiver and hears his soft whine.

“Alice…” he softly encourages, inching closer to her and placing a single hand upon her waist. She smooths her hand down his side and then back up to his opposite breast. Rubbing him gently with her palm, watching his eyes close and his head tilt back with abandon, she finds within her the courage to close the distance between them and press her lips to his skin.

His cry is quiet, but the hand at her waist grips the fabric of her shrift tightly. Encouraged, she applies her mouth to his chest a second time, parting her lips in order to breathe hotly against him, to tentatively lick his slightly salty skin, to nip at his flesh with her lips.

“Sa’e me, Alice!” he rasps urgently, his hand abandoning her waist to tear at the fastenings of his trousers. Eerily calm at the sight of his frantic struggle, Alice lifts her head and places a hand upon his. “Hush,” she soothes him, nudging his fingers aside and opening the buttons herself with care.

“Ha’e ye e’er seen a mahn…?” he whispers thinly, his chest still heaving.

“Only in sketches,” she admits, meeting his gaze. He closes his eyes and utters something which sounds very much like an Outlandish oath. “Sketches show what th’ mind sees and no’ th’ eyes,” he remarks in a very disgruntled tone, but he lifts his hips helpfully when Alice pushes aside the fabric of his trousers to release the telltale bulge within.

The moment he’s free of the garment, Alice glances down and understands instantly what he’d meant.

“Oh dear…”

The sketches she’d seen in anatomy books had been sorely and greatly lacking. She tries not to stare, but she has nowhere else to look other than his face while she composes herself. Alice suspects that her eyes are far too wide and her face too drawn to be of any comfort to him.

And yet, he giggles.

Alice gapes at him as his eyes twinkle and the darkness fades until she’s looking into twin pools of merry, grass green.

“Ahem! A look like that,” Tarrant whispers teasingly, “has the power to make a man feel very special, Alice.”

“Does it?” she replies, still a bit breathless with shock. Where is the pale, limp, manageably-sized
organ she’d expected? Dear Underland, but what she has encountered here is well beyond her ken.

“Oh, most definitely,” he assures her, collecting her hand, which still grips his trouser waistband, and lifting it to his lips.

She feels some of her surprise abate as he presses kisses to her fingertips.

“We’re o’ly learnin’,” he reminds her softly. “An’ if’n ye’d like teh, ye can continue auwr lesson.”

The words, spoken with mirth and love, give her courage rather than feed her uncertainty. She turns her hand in his grasp and brings his hand to her lips, kissing the inside of his wrist where his pulse hums and zooms. “All right,” she answers, taking up the gauntlet.

Alice returns his hand to her waist and places her palm against the center of his chest once more. She gives him a playful smile before sliding her hand down, past his chest, over his belly, and lower still.

He gasps and she startles when his heated flesh jerks beneath her fingers. She glances down, noting his flushed hue there and asks worriedly, “Have I hurt you?” Truly, it looks as if it must hurt.

“Nay,” he sighs, reaching up with his other hand to gently comb his fingers through the tresses which tumble down her back. “Nay, doesnae hurt. ’Tis a pleasure, Alice. A great pleasure.”

He seems sincere but she still cannot see how it could be so. Unsure of what sort of caress would be appropriate for such a portion of the body, she merely traces his length with her fingertips. He sighs and it is a sound that’s both one of relief and impatience.

“Am I moving too slowly?” she attempts to tease, glancing up to gauge his reaction as she supports him with her palm and then curves her fingers tentatively, as if she’s pouring a handful of sand back onto the shore of an infinite beach. She then slides her hand back toward herself and then once again toward him.

He hisses; his hips buck toward her and he surges against her touch. Alice gasps, finding herself in full possession of his length. A second Outlandish curse is bitten off by clenched teeth. Tarrant squeezes his eyes shut, fists both hands and endeavors to breathe through his nose. Alice waits for him to speak. When he does, he surprises her.

“Again, mae Alice.”

“Again?” she squeaks. Surely he must be joking. He looks as if she’s tormenting him!

“Aye, but if’n ye coul’ get a better grip…”

Alice swallows back her snort of shock. This is not the time for hysterics. “A better… grip?” she asks.

With a frustrated grunt, Tarrant reaches for her free hand and, bypassing her fingers, grasps her wrist. Wrapping his long fingers around her arm, he demonstrates what he requires of her by moving his unopened grasp up toward her hand and then back toward her elbow. “This,” he growls.

“All—all right,” she stutters. She curls her hand around him completely until her fingertips nearly touch the tip of her thumb, and moves her gasp as he’d indicated.
He moans in heartfelt relief, his hand on her waist stirs and his thumb brushes back and forth against her shrift. In her hair, the fingers of his other hand curl and loosen. “Alice,” he sighs, laying his head back upon the pillows and closing his eyes.

Startled by her success, Alice feels compelled to glance down, to watch his hips roll up to meet every downward motion of her hand. As his skin slides over the harder flesh beneath, she finds herself mesmerized by the contrast between their skin; her hand is so pale and the tip of him is flushed so darkly he appears bruised there. Bruised and glistening with moisture. Sweat perhaps?

Curious, Alice investigates by moving her thumb and sweeping the pad of it over that part of him.

“Ah!” he nearly shouts, his entire body tensing.

“T’m sorry!” Alice hastens to reply.

The hand at her waist clutches her through the shrift and Tarrant growls, “Once muir, Alice!”

Moving her grip upward, she cups him firmly and circles that smooth, damp, darkened flesh with her thumb, caressing him there with small, restless circles.

He groans out a breath so deeply she wonders that he can still breathe. It seems so ridiculous that such a simple touch could induce so much feeling and sensation, but she cannot deny that he is profoundly affected. His hips continue their rhythmic thrusts, pushing him into her grasp and she fumbles with both touching him there as requested and keeping her grip upon him.

“Alice…” he beseeches, lifting his head and guiding her face to his. “Oh, Alice,” he breathes just before their lips meet and he invades her mouth, making her body tingle and heat pool in her belly and travel downward. She wiggles at the sensation of slickness between her own thighs and he moans as her breasts brush against his chest.

Oh… oh! Alice gasps with sudden want as he releases her mouth. She lowers her face to his chest and nuzzles him as he had done to her, savoring the misting of sweat upon his skin. The muscles beneath her lips tighten and firm. His nipple stiffens beneath her chin.

He gasps her name out once more only this time it sounds different, stirs her from the sudden daze that had fallen over her at the sight, the sound, the feel, the scent, the taste of his desire. She looks up and into his sightless eyes as his hips jerk irregularly and the part of him in her grasp suddenly releases a warm wetness over her fingers.

Tarrant clutches her to him as he shudders and, in her grasp, pulses once, twice, three times, and then gradually begins to soften.

“Are you—all right?” she pants, trying not to wiggle and squirm against her own wetness even as she attempts to remain calm despite the cooling mess covering her fingers and making her grip far too slippery to maintain.

“Aye,” he huffs out at the ceiling. “Aye.” He seems to draw upon some hidden reserve to gather his strength and reaches for one of the several handkerchiefs he’d hung over the headboard. Collecting one, he reaches for her hand. “Here, Alice,” he bids softly, cleaning the stickiness from her fingers. Once she’s more or less clean, he attends to himself in full view of her and she watches, oddly unashamed.

“Was that the pleasure you spoke of?” she asks a few minutes later, when he seems to be finished.

Rather than relaxing back into the bed, he turns to her and, fitting his palm to her cheek, leans in
and kisses her daintily upon her lips. “Oh, yes,” he replies. That and no more.

Alice leans closer to him, initiates a kiss of her own, one that is deep and permits her to taste him thoroughly. He sighs needily and that small noise awakens something in her, some desire to be closer to him, to move as he had, to be touched as she’d touched him. Her hips twitch and, with her pressing against him so insistently, he feels it.

“‘Alice?’” he asks, abandoning the handkerchief and placing his hands upon her hips in question.

“‘I… I…” she pants ineffectually. She ducks her head, presses her lips to his throat, and murmurs, “Please?”

On a soft growl, he moves over her, rolling her onto her back. He shucks off his shirt, which still clings to his arms and kicks off his trousers completely. Alice wraps her arms around his shoulders as he leans down and kisses her deeply but briefly. She shivers at the too-short possession.

He doesn’t ask if she’s sure. He doesn’t need to: her hands, which press tightly against his skin, and her hips, which arch up to meet his touch, and her legs, which stir restlessly upon the bed, speak for her. His warm hand returns to her thigh even as he cradles her head in the crook of his elbow and nuzzles her neck with nose and lips and breath. Instantly, Alice finds herself breathless and overwhelmed, but having seen his passion, she no longer fears that this will be the death of her.

His palm slides up her thigh, fingers splayed, and she doesn’t hesitate now to open for him, to welcome his touch there.

“‘Alice!’” he whimpers against her neck, between hot kisses.

“Tarrant,” she replies and moves her hips toward his questing touch. And then she feels him, so gentle and hesitant, and he breathes out a prayer against her skin. Heart pounding once again, she opens herself up to this newness rather than retreat. She rocks her hips, inviting him closer, deeper…

On a strangled moan, he accepts, petting her and moving just within her there.

“Yes…” she hisses, her head falling back over his arm as his had done when she’d grasped him in her hand. She moves her hips as he had, urging him deeper. She tightens her arms around his shoulders and pulls him closer so that she can rub her aching, shirt-covered body against his heated, bare skin.

She can feel his touch inside her, moving within her. It seems so strange that she should want this, that her body would crave it mindlessly and helplessly. It is strange, she decides, but it is also vital. She needs this.

“Tarrant!”

“Hauw d’ye feel, luv?” he burrs, nipping at her earlobe.

“Empty,” she pants, unsure of what the word even means or how it can describe this overwhelming want which has taken command of her.

He moans in agreement and shifts closer. Against her hip she can feel his length, nearly firm once more. She gasps in both mindless want and utter panic.

“Hush,” he soothes her. “Jus’ a touch nauw, Alice. Hold on teh me.”
He is already touching her and she is already holding onto him so his words make little sense.

He eases out of her and before she can wail her denial, he glides his fingers up, sharing the warmth and slickness throughout her tender flesh, and then – just as she had done to him – he seeks, finds, and passes the pad of his thumb over something previously hidden from her.

“All righ’?” he asks, rubbing her gently.

She cannot answer. The waves of tingling, prickling sensation inundate her. *Is this pleasure?* she wonders. She isn’t sure, but she cannot bear to let him stop. She closes her eyes, clutches his shoulders, whines in the back of her throat, arches into his touch.

But it isn’t enough. Suspended as she is on this rack of sensation, she doesn’t know how to ask for that *more* which eludes her. And then she takes a wild guess and pleads, “I’m empty. Tarrant, I’m empty.”

He groans with her as he sinks back into her warmth, all the while keeping his thumb pressed to that amazingly sensitive nodule at the point of joining between her thighs and pelvis. She holds onto him as her hips twitch and rock against his hand. She hears the sound of her name again and again, anchoring her even when she is so lost within her own body that she cannot be sure she’s even still holding onto his solid shoulders.

He is *inside* her. He is moving *within* her. And then he is pressing against her *in there*, exerting pressure and rubbing her *from the inside* and oh! Yes! There, that place that place that place that place—!

She thrusts against him one last time and, hips twitching, screams out a thin breath as her body shudders, shivers, whimpers, shakes, huddles, bursts into being.

And then it releases her. She collapses limply upon the mattress, wondering why it should feel like she’s collapsing back when she’d already been lying down, but that’s hardly a matter worth investigating at the moment.

“*Alice*?” Tarrant asks softly, pressing kisses to her cheek. His fingers comb gently through her long hair and his hand—!

Her hips twitch as he begins to gently withdraw from within her. The sensation makes her moan, makes her shift so that her breasts rub against his chest. “*Tarrant*…” she objects.

He pauses. “*Aye, luv*?”

Alice frowns, chastising herself. Here she is, toes tingling and sweat cooling on her skin and her entire being humming with energy and yet she feels…

She opens her eyes and gasps at the flush upon Tarrant’s cheeks and the nearly-black quality of his eyes. Against her belly, she can feel him, firm and heavy. She lifts up a rubbery arm from the mattress and places it daringly upon his hip.

“I’m empty,” she whispers, leaning forward and placing a biting kiss upon his chest.

He trembles. “*Alice,*” he growls. “*Nae bairns. We’re agreed, aye?*”

“Yes, not yet,” she replies, nuzzling against his nearest nipple and letting one leg, bent at the knee, fall open.

The sound he makes could only be called a snarl, but is somehow hotter and capable of making
her gasp just at the feel of it rumbling in his chest beneath her cheek.

He surges over her, above her, and she shivers as his hips press against hers between her spread thighs and the length of him lies against the length of her still-aching flesh. She rocks against him, impatient, and the palm he’d just placed over her breast turns into a clutching hand.

She cries out, arching into the almost rough grip of his fingers.

“Nay,” he murmurs, reaching for the hem of her shift which had become bunched at her waist. “I’ll ha’e ye bare naw, Alice, mae Alice, mae wife.”

Bare appeals to her and she lifts her hips and shoulders to assist him in doing away with the garment. Fully freed from her clothing, Alice places her hands on his hips and mindlessly rubs against him once more, glorying in the feel of skin on skin even as her impatience mounts. 

“Tarrant…” she reminds him on a needy breath.

To further entice him, she wraps her arms around his chest and her legs around his hips and – What do you think you’re doing, Alice? – dismisses whatever lingering shyness and modesty she possesses. She thrusts her hips; she wants him. She wants him inside her, moving in her! That is all.

“Alice!” he warns her on a throaty command.

She wiggles against him in reply.

Growling, he reaches between them and guides himself to her opening there – Yes, there there there there! – and with maddening slowness begins to sink inside.

With a frustrated mewl, she hooks her feet behind his thighs and tries to lever him deeper.

“No! Alice!” he hisses urgently, grasping her hip with one hand to hold her still, and perhaps to hold himself still as well. “Trust me!” he rasps.

“I do,” she replies, closing her eyes and doing her best not to climb onto him and simply fill herself with him. “But it’s hard…” He’s hard and she’s soft and oh, it feels so strangely nice but it’s not nearly enough and just a bit more—!

“Patience, mae Alice,” he whispers against her cheek, his hips beginning to twitch to and fro in tiny, careful, shallow thrusts.

She takes a deep breath, filling her lungs with his scent. The action eases away a measure of her mindless want and she feels her thighs relax as some inner tension evaporates.

Tarrant kisses her shoulder in thanks and nudges a bit deeper into her. “Ye’ll ha’e as much o’ me as ye wan’, luv,” he promises, “but slowly, nauw.”

She wants it all – “Everything!” – but the waiting is driving her mad!

Above her, Tarrant groans again, swears softly and with thinning resolve, and then reaches a hand between them. She twitches helplessly as his thumb finds that place in her flesh which makes her squirm and tingle and gasp and writhe and he caresses her there mercilessly.

A second wave of thought-destroying sensation overwhelms her and, caught in its wake, she can only twitch and squeak out an abbreviated cry when he thrusts into her fully. She knows there should be pain. She’d overheard her mother warn her sister of this, and Alice feels it, after a fashion. It’s simply that the need and the rolling heat within her eclipse the sensation. Her lungs
are not big enough to contain her breaths and her heart is not strong enough to withstand the onslaught... and then, suddenly, the inner storm passes.

The feeling of shattering fades and Alice’s muscles turn to jelly and she finds herself pinned to the bed – literally pinned! – by her husband who is filling her completely. She looks up at him, noting the scowl upon his face as he endeavors to remain perfectly still, the shaking of his arms as he tries to keep his weight from crashing down upon her, his lovely and luscious lower lip which he is biting most mercilessly.

Placing her hands on his biceps, she shifts a bit beneath him and gasps as the ache blends into the wonderful, soul-satisfying knowledge that he is touching her in her deepest place. “Husband,” she says, savoring the word, knowing that she has him and that he is her Tarrant.

He doesn’t reply with words. His brows twitch slightly. Alice leans up and delivers a delicate lick to his abused lip. His hips twitch forward on a gasp which Alice shares. She frames his face in her hands and moves her hips in reply.

With that, the spell is broken. He releases the breath he’d been holding and moves gently against her – within her – and it does ache a bit, but in the best of ways. Lost to it, to the idea that she has him now and he is hers and she can feel him there, Alice lies back upon the bed, open to his will. Her hands smooth down his heated skin to his chest and she presses each to one of his muscular breasts, teasing his nipples with restless, irregular sweeps of her fingers.

He speaks her name as if it is a prayer. She likes that – being his prayer, perhaps being the answer to his prayers. It’s a tall order to fill, but she’d like to try. She’d like to be that much – everything! – to him.

The ache within her builds again and he seems to grow larger – or perhaps she is becoming smaller? Perhaps it is the latter because he groans her name and quickens his movements just marginally, but it builds too quickly – What is this pain-need-tight-breathless-panic!?

“Tarrant!” she chokes.

“Tae much?” he whispers, slowing once more.

“Hn!” she replies, nodding, feeling her eyes roll back into her head and her lashes flutter shut. “What—what—?” What is this? she wants to ask, but doesn’t know how.

He stills completely and leans toward her, pressing kisses to her neck and jaw until she turns toward him and their mouths meet. He kisses her gently, sweetly, but the urgency within her is uncontrollable. She deepens the kiss frantically, bites his lower lip and shifts against him. Against her will, her hips move to and fro, then swivel as she needs to feel more than him simply filling her. She needs the friction, and yet it makes everything so unbearably aching and tight.

“It hurts,” she tells him, wincing as she moves against him.

Slowly, he presses against her, putting his full weight against her hips so that she cannot move them at all. He is at the deepest yet, but she cannot stop wanting more!

“Then stop, Alice. Rest. Shhh,” he croons, petting her cheeks and kissing her chin. “Breathe deeply, love.”

She tries, she truly does, but her legs insist on moving – oh how lovely his hips feel against her thighs! – and her hips twitch – although she can only sense his presence rather than feel him fully – and yet she fears that what her body seeks will destroy her.
“Tarrant… I’m…” She closes her eyes and whispers her greatest fear. “I’m not sure if I like this.”

“It’s frightfully new,” he agrees, still remaining perfectly still. “New things are frightful.”

Alice feels her lips curve into a smile as his words call forth her reply from the memory of his shoe fitting: “But they are only new for a moment, and then they’re not anymore.”

Still bracing himself upon his elbows, he cradles her face in his hands and asks, “Woul’ ye like me teh stop, Alice?”

No, no she wouldn’t. No matter how terrifying or uncomfortable this is, she wants to see it through. This is part of their new life together. She will not leave things unfinished. “Don’t stop,” she replies.

“Then open yer eyes, mae Alice.”

“Does it help?” she asks hopefully as she complies.

“Mayhap,” he answers honestly. “We’re learnin’ t’nigh’ an’ we’ve o’ly auwrselves teh turn teh.”

Alice nods, drawing a fortifying breath. “In that case, it’s up to us to find the right answer, isn’t it?”

Her reward for his observation is a slow, hot, teasing kiss that makes her shiver. She lifts her feet from the mattress and trails her instep up his thighs. Grasping his shoulders tightly in her hands, she shifts against him, rolls her hips, and then gasps as he replies in kind.

It’s slow and hesitant, halting and gentle. She spares a thought for his urgency earlier when she’d touched him with only her hand and feels instantly guilty.

“I’m sorry,” she remarks on a gasp.

His shallow, gentle movements still. “Alice?”

“No, no!” she hastens to explain, moving against him and urging him to continue. The ache is still there but it is not nearly so frightening. “I meant, we’re moving so slowly and you… earlier you seemed very…” Words desert her.

“Alice,” he chastises her softly, his hips rolling slowly as hers rock upwards. “I’ve twine favors teh ask o’ ye.”

“Yes?” She looks up into his gaze.

“Firs’, we’ve nae schedule teh keep. We’re o’ly learnin’ t’nigh’. ”

“And the second?”

“Ne’er,” he rasps, lifting a hand and passing his palm over her soft breast, “say ye’re sorry in auwr bed.” He doesn’t wait for her response to that. Tarrant lowers his mouth to her neck and once more kisses his way toward her breasts, leaning back and bracing himself upon his hands again. The angle at which they’re joined changes and suddenly—!

“Oh!” Alice gasps, startled and dazzled by the shift.

“Gehd?” he asks as he moves again and presses against her there, just there.

“I think so,” she manages, still dazed.
“Thinkin’…” he seems to gently reprimand her, but he thrusts once more and her thoughts scatter. She clutches his arms, closes her eyes, and urges him with restless caresses of her thighs. Perhaps it’s minutes later (or mere seconds) when she feels the panic-inducing tension begin to creep up on her again.

“Tarrant?” she asks, seeking reassurance. Opening her eyes, she watches him clench his jaw.

“Aye, I feel ye. Daes it still hurt?”

She isn’t sure. He touches her deeply there again and she closes her eyes, tightens her fingers, and feels her back begin to arch.

“R’member before,” he coaches her gently. “Thar’s pleasure if’n ye can allow yerself teh feel it.”

And then he moves a bit faster. She gasps out her breath as the ache blossoms and her body tightens and her heart strains and her muscles burn and then—!

Too exhausted to resist any longer, she lets go. She lets her body do as it must. She hears Tarrant’s soft oath as her every muscle flexes and seems to lock in place. And then the release comes in slow, shimmering waves of tingles sweeping over her, just like before but more.

Sighing out a moan of relief, she releases her grip on Tarrant’s arms and simply lies upon the bed, eyes closed, and body humming contentedly.

It takes her a moment more to summon the energy to conclude, “That was nice.”

Tarrant’s giggle is rather strained. She opens her eyes and looks up at him. What she sees is rather startling. He’s sitting back a bit, bracing himself above her with one hand while the other… Surely he’s not grasping himself where they’re joined… is he?

“Tarrant?”

“A moment, laddie,” he burrs through gritted teeth. “Nae bairns; we agreed,” he replies as if repeating a mantra.

It’s then that she realizes that he’s on the verge of, er, releasing again only this time within her. He could have removed himself entirely only… only she’s sure she won’t enjoy the sensation much. Despite how strange and impossible it had seemed for her to accommodate (and even enjoy) his full length within her, she finds that having him inside her feels rather normal now. Warm, complete.

Still, she offers (if somewhat reluctantly), “Shall I withdraw?”

He shakes his head vigorously and continues forcing his breaths to remain deep and even. She waits, feeling a little awkward now. And then slowly, very slowly he begins to relax. He returns his other hand to the mattress, covers her more fully, and opens his bright green eyes.

“Are you all right?” she asks worriedly, smoothing her foot up and down the back of his thigh.

“Aye. Aye.” He covers her mouth with his and gently nudges at her lips until she opens for him.

When he moves away to nuzzle the shell of her ear, Alice winds her arms around his shoulders and asks, “Would you like me to…? Well, you didn’t… I could, um… again…”

He interrupts her awkward offer. “I’m fine,” he promises against her shoulder. “To feel yer
pleasure, Alice. ‘Tis far greater than feelin’ o’ly mine.”

“You can’t be serious,” she retorts. His pleasure had been rather awe-inspiring, honestly. Even now, she feels odd tingles within her at the memory of it.

“Oh, I am.” He leans back and asks gently, “Are ye all righ’ nauw?”

She thinks about that for a moment before she nods. The ache from the initial breach is returning and the wetness where they’re joined is cooling. Very shortly, things will become quite uncomfortable, she’s sure. But, what’s more, that wild want which had taken her seems to be assuaged.

“Yes,” she answers, shifting slightly and noting that she can’t feel him as well as she had before. Perhaps he’s softening once again? “It’s… I’m fine.”

Tarrant brushes a breathy kiss against her cheek before he slowly begins to withdraw. As he does so, she discovers that she’d been right about this; it is more than uncomfortable although it is not painful. A profound feeling of loss accompanies his retreat. Alice winces.

Of course, he sees it. “Are ye hurtin’?”

She shakes her head. How to tell him that she’s empty again? How can she possibly find the words to explain that she’s no longer whole, no longer Absolutely Alice now that he and she are separate again?

_I miss you already_, she doesn’t say. She doesn’t want to see regret or sadness in his eyes. She says instead, “I think I liked it. All of it, I mean. Not just the very end.”

He releases his held breath and Alice realizes how he might have thought – or feared – that she hadn’t cared for… er, what they’d done. She reaches up and pets his brows, his nose, his lower lip. “Maybe we could try once more? Later?”

Tarrant’s bright, green eyes close and he leans forward to simply press his cheek to hers and breathe in her scent from her tousled hair. “Much later, my Alice.”

“Much? Later than tomorrow?” Surely not!

“Yes. I’ve wounded you, Alice. You’ll need time to heal.”

Oh, blast. He’s entirely correct. How irritating! She huffs impatiently. Tarrant giggles into her hair and runs a hand up and down her arm as if she feels a chill and he means to keep her warm.

“Woul’ ye like me teh run ye a bath?”

“Will you wash my hair again?” she bargains, already imagining the feel of his hands in her soapy hair and the hot water lapping against her bare breasts and the water currents tickling her legs…

“If ye wish,” he agrees huskily. Perhaps he shares the same vision. He presses a kiss to her temple and then rolls out of bed to fetch his robe. Alice waits, still lying atop the quilt on the bed, and smiles warmly at him as he lays her own dressing gown over her nude body. “I’ll be back in a few moments.”

“I’ll be here,” she promises and watches a shiver tremble through him. He gives her one more lingering kiss before he pushes himself away from her and strides from the room. The moment she hears the kitchen door shut, Alice leans over the edge of the bed and fumbles for her skirt. Retrieving it from the floor, she removes a small vial from the pocket. Suddenly, Mirana’s remark
about her needing a second dose makes perfect sense.

Alice decides she’ll blush later. For now…

For now she simply drinks. She closes her eyes and sighs as the same warmth blossoms deep within her, healing her, relaxing her, and making it very possible for her to move things ahead of schedule. Grinning widely, she slides her arms into the dressing gown’s sleeves and ties the belt tightly across her waist. Perhaps she won’t tell Tarrant tonight. No, tonight is for embraces and slow, unhurried kisses and cuddles beneath their quilt in their bed. But tomorrow morning…

Perhaps she’ll turn toward him upon awakening and kiss him until his eyes open. Or perhaps she’ll wake late and have to hunt him down in the kitchen where he’s making tea; perhaps she’ll sit him down upon a chair and then settle in his lap for a kiss; or she might lead him to the table, and he’ll lift her up onto the edge, push her skirt out of the way while she fumbles with his trouser buttons and then he’ll fill her once more, pull her close with an arm across her back; maybe he’ll grow impatient and, still joined, lift her up and carry her the eight steps to their bed where he’ll move over her like a storm, surge deep within her like thunder…

Alice takes a deep breath, opens her eyes, and smiles. Oh yes. Tomorrow holds many possibilities.
Whenever Hamish considers how many days have passed since Alice vanished from his family’s country estate, how many weeks he’d spent in fear for his sanity, how many months he’d endured aboard the Wonder, how many years he’d devoted to his father’s company in China, he finds himself feeling breathless and panicked, as if he had lived nothing but a dream… or perhaps he’d merely dreamed of living.

He stares at the photograph displayed upon the mantle in the Kingsleigh parlor – stares at the version of himself who had stood beside Alice and her one-day-had-better-be husband in Victoria City’s only photography studio – and steels his heart against regret. It is a futile exercise. The very contents of the jacket pocket which rests over his heart prevent him from accomplishing the task. The favor and the letter from Underland’s White Queen press insistently upon him, a weight he can neither withstand nor escape.

A little over a year ago, he had come to realize that the redemption he sought could be obtained neither by his own good works nor from within himself. He had at last succumbed to the necessity of reading Mirana’s letter.

That had been a mistake. After so much time had passed, he should have burned it, abandoned it, simply moved on with his life and the choice he’d tacitly made by refusing to open it for so long. Hamish presses a hand to his jacket’s breast pocket and swallows back his despair.

My dear Sir Hamish,

Even now the memory of those written words makes his heart beat faster. To think she’d still cared for him despite what he’d done…!

If you are worried that I hold you responsible for Iracebeth’s death, then you worry needlessly. It is I who am sorry. And it is she whom I cannot forgive for placing you in such a dire position and forcing you to make such a horrible choice.

Forgiveness. It should have been harder to earn. Even now he feels cheated, as if she should have asked him to walk through fire or cut off his own hand or give up all his possessions and comforts to make amends.

I miss you very much.

“And I you,” he whispers to the looking glass hung over the photograph-crowded mantle.
Perhaps you’ve wondered how or why you arrived here again and again so easily. It was because of Alice, you see. Now that you no longer seek to understand her fate, you are unlikely to stumble into Underland on a whim. Underland itself will not force you to return, my dear Sir Hamish. Not even a royal decree could manage to bring you here against your will. (And I confess that I have been tempted to try nonetheless.) But while you are free to turn aside each invitation, take care for Underland will not wait indefinitely for you to accept. The longer you linger Above, the fewer doors will be opened until, in time, they will be shut to you completely. This is your choice and I must accept it should you prefer to remain Above and us apart…

The letter had frightened him when he’d read it and he’d had good reason to fear. With each day that had passed thereafter, he’d grown more desperate to step into that fantastical world again – to hell with duties and familial obligations and his father’s business! – and beg her indulgence of his very late arrival. But, with each day that had passed, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He didn’t find himself sitting down on a seat aboard the Underland Express or turning the corner in Whotchworks or opening a door into a cluttered workshop closet or even extracting himself from beneath a table set for tea.

The doors had already been closed.

That was when he’d given up. He’d acquiesced to his mother’s pleas to return home. He’d handed over the reins of the trade office to his successor despite feeling as if he were leaving one hundred and twenty-one things unfinished. Five years – nearly to the day – since Alice and Hightopp had disappeared from this parlor, Hamish had boarded the ship, sailed home, and even let his mother believe he agrees with her: it is long past time he selected a suitable wife.

Hamish sighs. Yes, he has things to be getting on with. Not growing old alone and childless being chief among them. Unfortunately, he doesn’t give a damn about the fate of the Ascot name or its fortune. The only thing he wants is the one thing he cannot have.

“I envy you, Alice,” he tells her softly smiling image, “for the choice you had the courage to make.”

He is Mirana’s perfect match. He sees that clearly now. In all the time since he’d hurriedly dived to retrieve her fluttering handkerchief and inadvertently passed back into the reality of his rented home in Victoria City, he’d never once felt anything close to the nervous, nearly explosive energy which had overwhelmed him in her presence. Alice had been right: he had been a-twitter for the White Queen. But the Iracebeth had shot Alice and set her sights on him and Hamish had reacted. The guilt from that single action had thrust all thoughts of twitterpation from his mind. He’d abandoned that future – he’d abandoned her –and all that he has left now is the life of the dutiful son.

“Hamish?”

He turns at the sound of the parlor door opening and gives a years-older Helen Kingsleigh as warm a smile as he can manage. “Good afternoon, madam.”

She crosses the room and holds out her hands to him. “It’s so very good to see you,” she greets him, levering herself up on her toes to press a warm kiss to each of his freshly shaven cheeks. Stepping back, she continues, “I can never thank you enough for locating Alice and urging her to write to me.”

Hamish confides, “It took very little persuasion on my part. Once I explained how distraught you
were, her concern that you would disapprove of her choice diminished. Truly, she was uncommonly sensible on the matter.”

“Not so much with her choice of spouse,” Helen contributes candidly. “She was right to anticipate my disappointment, but in her letters she is well and happy. Considering the alternative of never knowing what became of her and forever fearing that some ill had befallen her, yes, I am content.” She frowns thoughtfully. “Despite never having met her husband myself.”

Hamish doesn’t suggest that Alice and her hatter will ever arrive in London for a visit. It is bad enough that a Kingsleigh daughter has married so far beneath her station. Were they two to appear on the streets of London, the humiliation of her mother and sister would be unbearable.

Undoubtedly realizing this as well, Helen changes the topic. “Did she happen to send a letter with you?”

“I’m afraid not. I’m sure she intended to, but perhaps she mistook my departure date for later.”

“Yes, that sounds likely,” Alice’s mother agrees. She then sighs and her fond exasperation turns to idle puzzlement. “It’s the oddest thing: whenever one of her letters is delivered in the post, I never fail to see the same grey tabby cat lurking about.”

“A strange coincidence,” Hamish responds with the expected dearth of imagination.

Reassured, Helen agrees. “It must be. Now, Hamish, tell me about this event your mother is organizing. It’s the talk of the town.”

He winces. “Yes, I imagine it is.”

“I can’t recall the last time the Ascots hosted a ball let alone one of such magnificent scale.”

“It’s a rare occasion,” he replies woodenly. Yes, it’s not often the only son of a prosperous and titled family is shown off like a prize stud.

Helen pats his arm gently. “Surely, your mother isn’t inviting *every* eligible female from London Society?”

If only she weren’t, but… “I believe the invitations have already been sent out.” And if Hamish doesn’t choose one of the young ladies present for his wife, then his mother will happily choose for him. His days as a lonely bachelor are numbered. His father will be happy to see him with a suitable companion. His mother will be pleased to have adorable grandchildren. Hamish, however, wants no part of any of it.

“I know that look,” Helen warns him softly.

He glances up and meets her gaze.

“Don’t go bounding off into the wood, dear,” she advises, clearly thinking of her youngest daughter’s initial and very public exit from the engagement party so long ago. “Stand tall and strong and, as this is a gala, try not to step on too many toes.”

“I shall endeavor to do my best.” Such as it is.

They have tea and talk of other things and then he bids her farewell. As they say their goodbyes, Mrs. Kingsleigh promises to let him know when the next letter arrives so that she can share Alice’s next sketches with him. It doesn’t occur to Hamish to ask what sort of sketches she sends until he’s seated once more in the carriage and it is rolling along toward the country estate where
the party preparations are in full swing. Of course, she probably assumes that Hamish has no need of viewing images of Alice’s life as he’d purportedly been living in the same city as her for five years.

He sighs. Lies and dreams, in time both must end. Once, he would have lectured himself to look toward the future, but the thought is not a comfort now. In a few days, the rest of his life will be decided and Helen is right: it would be for the best if he were to avoid stepping on any toes.

The advice seems simple, but Hamish quickly realizes that it is far too difficult to follow. He stands aside as draperies are removed from the ballroom windows, floors cleaned, and a feast of refreshments prepared. He suffers through fitting after fitting until his own qualities cannot be improved by further alterations of the suit and tailcoat he’ll wear. The sounds of ongoing work make him think of a gallows being built and the ascot around his neck feels like a noose.

The night of the event itself, the gala rapidly swells to grotesque proportions as nearly every invitation is accepted. His only comfort is that his life is not the only one being dictated. Brothers and cousins of many of the young women present are also on display, hoping for a good match to come from tonight’s festivities.

The crowd ringing the ballroom dance floor is composed of mothers hoping to introduce their daughters to Lady Ascot and fathers eager to establish a familial allegiance with her husband. For the first time, Hamish damns his own success in China. It appears he’s made his own family one of the wealthiest in all of London. He’ll not be able to escape marriage now, he knows. His mother will have a line of girls assembled by the end of the evening and if he rejects the first, he’ll be presented with a second and so on and so forth.

Hamish spends the night on the dance floor, hiding from the necessity of that decision behind mindless action. Whom he dances with, he can’t really say. One after another, the hand of a young woman is passed to him. Sometimes the girl attempts conversation and sometimes the dance is borne in silence. Hamish doesn’t really care that he’s behaving badly. He ought to be charming and dashing. Yet, the only dashing he wants to do is away from this blasted circus.

His feet have long since stopped hurting and have turned blessedly numb when something catches his eye. As the song that the orchestra is playing beings to wind to a halt, a flash of white out of the corner of his eye demands his attention. He looks toward it even as he tells himself that it isn’t her – it cannot possibly be her! – but he looks anyway, helpless to stop himself and—

He stumbles to a halt, his feet crushing his unfortunate partner’s toes. At any other time, he would have cared. He would have apologized profusely and offered her whatever assistance was required. Perhaps a handkerchief for her tears of reaction, but the only one he carries on him is Mirana’s and he will not part with it for anything.

“Mirana…” he chokes, staring across the sea of well-dressed well-to-dos (and well-would-like-tos) and watches as a woman in a white gown with long white hair pauses on her way toward the terrace doors. She pauses and the fingers of her uplifted hands caress the air. Hamish feels his knees weaken as her dark gaze slides in his direction and her lips curve into a gentle, beckoning smile.

“Mirana!” he calls over the fading strains of the violins. People stare at him. He doesn’t care. He cares only that Mirana seems to be real, wishes only that she approach the dance floor and take him away from this farce that is his life.

For a single, breathless moment, it appears as if she will turn toward him… but then she continues toward the terrace, her path unimpeded.
“No!” he hisses, staggering after her. Gasps of shock, outrage, and titillation follow in his wake. Yes, he’s making a fool of himself and no, he’s doesn’t give a damn.

Hamish squeezes and pushes his way through the dancers who have come to a shocked stand-still upon the floor. He then dives into the crowd which separates him from the terrace doors. Over their heads and past their shoulders, he glimpses the dainty shove Mirana gives the nearest door and then sweeps from the room.

Gritting his teeth, Hamish give chase, bumping many people in his inexcusable haste. And when he reaches the terrace, he sees no one.

“Mirana!” It would have been a shout but for his pounding heart which makes him breathless with urgency. Before he can say her name yet again, the light from the party falls upon something resting on the top step of the stairs which lead down to the lawn. It sparkles and gleams briefly. Unthinkingly, Hamish bends over and picks it up.

“A shoe,” he remarks, staring at the object in his grasp. It must be a shoe although he’s never seen one like it: a lady’s slipper which appears to glitter with thousands of tiny glass beads.

And then a second flash of white teases him from the periphery of his vision. He looks up, scans the grounds frantically and—

*There!*  

“Mirana!”

He scrambles after her as she disappears into the woods beyond the garden gazebo. Hamish’s shoes had not been made for running, especially not across dew-slickened grass, but he makes it to the edge of the wood in what he’s positive must be record time. The path stretching into the forest is littered with windfall and he slides over leaves and trips over sticks, but no matter how many times he nearly tumbles to the ground, when he looks up Mirana is just there, leading him deeper into the wood.

He follows. He briefly considers the possibility that he has gone mad at last and he is chasing a figment of his imagination rather than the woman he’d thought lost for all time and, blast it, even if this is a mirage, he prefers it to that damnable party!

Up ahead, she pauses beside an old, gnarled tree upon which she rests her pale hand. He freezes, panting and perspiring, as she glances over her shoulder, smiles once more and then—!

“No!” he cries, lurching toward her to stop her fall. He dives for the base of the tree just as she disappears from view, swallowed up by the darkness of the void which yawns before him.

“Mirana!” he whispers, wanting and wishing it had really been her, but it must have been because he still holds her glass slipper in his grasp and—

Suddenly, the earth beneath his free hand gives way, unbalancing him and pitching him forward into the abyss. Clutching her shoe, he closes his eyes and simply permits himself to fall, for he has already fallen – has been falling – and it will be her and her alone who has the power to help him stand upright again.

*~*~*~*
“Where has my pink ribbon gone now?” Alice hears Tarrant ask just across the way in their joint workshop. She grins as a telltale giggle echoes from underneath her worktable.

“Has it run off?” she asks, playing the game and keeping her attention focused on the boot she’s stitching.

“I didn’t hear either the cat or his fiddle,” her husband muses.

“But that’s the dish and the spoon,” she corrects. “Maybe the pink ribbon ran away to the cooing of the pigeons.”

Giving his workstation one last thorough look, Tarrant turns and leans back against the table. He crosses his arms and burrs, “I think ye ken muir than ye’re sayin’, mae Alice.”

“Of course! I know a lot of things,” she reminds him. Namely, she knows precisely what that particular shade of green which is currently darkening his eyes means… and she’s very much looking forward to what usually occurs once it’s been spotted. She also knows just the look to give him in order to set those things in motion. She tilts her chin up and offers him a cheeky smile.

“Whot a seemly grin,” he remarks, predictably stalking toward her.

Alice arches her brows. “Hardly! I would never allow a seam to grin in my workshop.”

He braces a hand upon the tabletop and leans down, caging Alice upon her bench seat. “If’n tha’s yer intent, ye’ve missed one,” he points out, leaning down as Alice lifts her face and their lips meet, part, and meld together in a deep kiss.

She sighs with contentment as his warm fingers delve into her hair, holding her close and steady. Even now, she is distinctly aware of the heat of him. He is always so warm. Ever since his heart had been mended it has been thus.

“Papa!”

Tarrant staggers back a step as the perpetrator herself is driven to reveal her part in the theft of the pink ribbon due to an overabundance of boredom. Alice bites back a laugh as Tarrant affects a shocked expression.

“What’s this?” he lisps at the little girl clutching his pant leg. “Have you found my lost ribbon for me, darling Diana?”

“I found it!” she announces gleefully, tugging at the tails of the ribbon wrapped messily – or perhaps artfully – around her head. “My ribbon!”

“Oh, dear,” Alice remarks.

“Hm, yes,” Tarrant agrees, crouching down to speak to the self-confessed criminal earnestly. “I’m afraid you will have to share a bit of your ribbon with Lady Fanchine’s sun hat, my dear.”

Just as Diana’s lower lip plumps into a pout and she begins to shake her head in stubborn refusal, a bell chimes from without. Ah, a customer. What utterly perfect timing! Alice levers herself up off the bench and, giving Tarrant’s shoulder a pat for luck in passing, steps out into the shop.
“Good late-morning to you,” Alice begins. “How can I be of assistan—Hamish?”

“Alice!”

For a moment they gape at each other in stunned silence. And then Hamish announces – “Yes, I might have known you’d have a shop like this” – just as Alice declares – “Whatever are you doing in a tailcoat?”

And then they each reply in concert, Alice blusteringly demanding, “What’s wrong with my shop, Hamish?” just as Hamish retorts, “Escaping from a gala, naturally.”

The thought of Hamish escaping from anything rather pulls Alice up short, just long enough for Hamish to answer her question.

“What’s wrong with the shop?” He glances around rather pompously until he can no longer maintain the act and his lips curve into a charmed smile. “Not a single thing, Alice. It’s marvelous.”

“Well,” she replies, mollified. “Of course it is.”

Hamish’s gaze darts down to her belly and although Alice has no particular desire to avoid speaking of the fact that she’s visibly with child, her curiosity urges her to inquire abruptly, “How did you arrive this time, then? And what was the gala for? Did you go back to London?”

“Er, yes, I’ve just come from the country estate. I recently made the journey back England, you see. And, as for my arrival, I seem to have fallen down something of a remarkably large rabbit hole.”

“The rabbit hole?” Alice repeats, blinking. “Then why-ever aren’t you a foot-and-a-half tall right now?”

Hamish doesn’t seem to know how to respond to that. Thankfully, Tarrant has a theory and shares it. “Perhaps,” he lisps, coming into the shop with a very pleased-looking little girl in his arms, her bright red hair tied back in a neat ponytail with a small clipping of pink ribbon, “because he used a different door, my Alice.”

“No,” she insists. “The key I used was for the smallest door.”

“And it had to be at the time. The smaller you were, the more convenient for traveling.”

She considers that before grudgingly admitting, “Well, as my escorts were rather… smallish, I suppose that makes sense.” She then turns back to Hamish and smiles, “So you came through one of the larger doors?”

“Er, yes,” he replies, still visibly struggling to understand Tarrant’s logic. “And I stepped through directly into your shop.”

“Oh! Then you haven’t seen the outside of it yet!” Alice enthuses, bustling forward. As she lays a hand on Hamish’s reflexively offered arm, she pauses long enough to say sincerely, “It is wonderful to see you again.”

“You as well, madam. Your mother sends her love.”

“And you came all this way to deliver the message?” She’s sure there must be more to this visit than that!
Hamish hesitates, looking vaguely embarrassed. “Actually, I was… in pursuit of a lady who stepped out of this shoe.”

Alice glances down as he produces a woman’s slipper from his coat pocket.

“All right!” Tarrant remarks. “That looks remarkably like one of the glass slippers our lovely queen commissioned from you!”

“It more than looks like one,” Alice determines, giving the shoe a careful examination. “It is.” Returning her attention to Hamish, she notes his ramrod-straight posture and inquires with no small amount of suspicion, “Did the White Queen pay you a visit Above?”

“Er, I believe so, yes.”

Alice grits her teeth, suddenly overcome with the urge to beat her childhood friend with the very shoe he’s seeking to deliver. “You clod, Hamish! Have you truly made her wait so long?”

“It wasn’t my fault! The doors to Underland closed of their own accord.”

“Rubbish!”

“I tried, Alice!”

“Not with enough genuine effort!”

Clearing his throat loudly, Tarrant steps between the two of them and points out, “Yes, yes, Hamish is very late, but he is here now – at the White Queen’s invitation, it would seem! – and he has a task to perform.”

Alice leans away from the insufferable man standing in her family’s shop dressed with irritating perfection. “Yes, that’s true. And he’d best get on with it.”

Tarrant shares a grin with the little girl in his arms and then winks at Hamish. “Would you care for some tea?” he invites.

“I appreciate the offer,” Hamish replies, “but as you mentioned, I am quite late as it is. If you’d be so kind as to point the way to the castle where I can find Mira—er, the White Queen, I’d be much obliged.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hamish,” Alice begins.

Tarrant interjects, “No, no, please, be as ridiculous as you like! But we’ll do more than point the way.” As Tarrant lowers the little girl to the floor where she grabs a fistful of Alice’s skirts, he continues, “Alice, if you would tend to tea while I wrap up Lady Franchine’s hat…?”

“Oh, all right. Here, now, Dianna. Let’s go to the house. Where’s—?”

“Mumma?”

Turning, Alice holds out a hand to the little boy peeping around the edge of the doorway, studying the visitor. “Ah! There you are. Come along, Edan. It’s time for tea!”

“Tea??” Hamish squawks indignantly before abruptly rounding on Tarrant and jabbing a finger in the center of his chest. “You beast! Three children in five years?!!”

Tarrant blinks once, his brows twitching.
Alice leaps to his defense, “For goodness’ sake, Hamish, whatever makes you think five years Above equates to five years Below?”

Some of the righteous indignation in Hamish’s reddened face fades. “But there are still two children plus the one—?”

“Under my nose?” Alice quips with a smart grin. “Yes, that number is exactly as it appears to be.”

“How about Hamish?” Hamish gives Tarrant one last, long look of warning before stomping for the door.

As Tarrant scoops up Edan and settles him in Alice’s arms, he muses, “Do you suppose Hamish is also unaware of the facts of life?”

Alice leans forward and presses a kiss to Tarrant’s cheek. Each of their children is a miracle to her, for each of them was conceived out of love. Tarrant loves her with all his mended heart. “I’m afraid so, but it is not your responsibility to inform him of them.”

“Then I shall have to think of some other topic to discuss or the trip to Marmoreal will be twice as long as usual.” He places a hand atop Diana’s head and upon Edan’s back and, leaning forward to press a kiss to Alice’s lips, he confides, “And I have so many reasons to return as quickly as I can.”

“That you do,” she agrees. “Now, let’s see about this tea,” she concludes with a rhyme, making Tarrant giggle.

Locating Hamish outside, she interrupts his admiration of the shop’s brightly painted eaves and shutters to lead him into the house. Proper introductions are made, tea is poured and sweetened, and – eventually – her old friend’s story comes out. Alice doesn’t reassure Hamish that he won’t have to accept the hand of the lady his mother has selected for him. She doesn’t remind him that here, in Underland, he will make his own path. The way he handles the White Queen’s glass slipper with care as he stows it once again in his jacket pocket tells her he is aware of the fact that he’s been given a second chance… and he does not intend to waste it.
in which a lost shoe and a keepsake are returned

Chapter 25

The journey to Marmoreal should have taken longer, Hamish decides. He’s startled by this thought, but he can’t deny that he agrees with it wholeheartedly. Although he’d spent the entirety of the trip wishing the donkey pulling the cart would put a bit of spring in her step, and although he’d had to stop himself from fidgeting nervously, and although he’d constantly had to remind himself that Hightopp means well with his idle, nonsensical chatter, now that Hamish is staring at the pearlescent gates of the palace, he finds, to his consternation, that he is not at all prepared to face Mirana.

In that moment, he’d happily hand over his favorite walking stick in exchange for being back in the cart, entertaining Hightopp’s mad notions regarding the emotional states of the local flora and fungi—

“The toadstools are standing tall. Yes, I think you’re expected in Marmoreal!” Tarrant Hightopp had announced quite suddenly once they’d entered the forested path.

“Toadstools,” Hamish had huffed. “I should think that the mushrooms would know better!”

“Only if her Majesty were indoors.” He’d peered at a cluster of poisonously pink fungi. “All the rooms appear to be unoccupied, however. They’re all connected, you know.”

No, he hadn’t. “Next you’ll be telling me that the willows are actually weeping.”

“Well… they are. I didn’t want to say,” Hightopp replied in a subdued tone. “It’s quite rude to draw attention to a monarch’s tears, you know.”

A monarch’s tears. Hamish supposes he should brace himself for that. Additionally, he is sure that a good deal of begging will be involved and that it will be a decidedly uncomfortable experience. He will have no pride left in the end, and she might still refuse him.

But, if that happens, he doubts he’ll care about his lack of self-respect.

As the donkey clatters to a sighing stop beside a stable boy, Hightopp thanks her profusely. The creature merely passes wind in acknowledgement of the praise. Hamish removes himself from the cart before a stray breeze can push the stench in his direction.

The Hatter removes three hatboxes from the back of the cart and then the donkey practically pushes the stable boy in the direction of the water trough.

Hamish marvels at the creature’s temperament which seems to be uncannily similar to his mother’s disposition. “Do you suppose all females are like that?” he hears himself ask.

Hightopp cackles. “Of course they are! Why, if they didn’t show us how much we appreciate them, we’d never notice.”

A bubble of humor bursts forth from Hamish’s chest, explodes through his throat, and rings out as a bark of laughter. Surprisingly, much of his building anxiety is dispersed with it. Hightopp claps
him once upon the shoulder and then, hefting the awkwardly-sized hat boxes, makes for the castle.

For a moment, Hamish stands upon the castle drive alone. He feels disconcerted and anxious, but he is not fearful any longer. Mirana would not have come Above and enticed him to follow her Below simply to mete out punishment.

Locating a soldier dressed oddly – like a knight upon a chessboard – Hamish inquires solicitously, “Would you happen to know where I might be received by her majesty, the White Queen?”

The guard points in silence down a garden trail and, although the direction surprises Hamish – could Hightopp’s theory about the mushrooms and toadstools be correct? – he does not question it.

“Thank you,” he says and steps onto the stone path. As he follows the winding trail, the bread and cheese and fruit that he and Hightopp had eaten on the way to Marmoreal churn in his belly. His stomach, always oversensitive, responds to his mood with predictable disquiet. Just when he is beginning to fear that the path is in fact leading him away from Marmoreal and back to Alice and the Hatter’s home, he comes around a bend and—

There she is.

He skids to a halt, marveling at the vision before him. Mirana perches on a swing suspended beneath the boughs of a massive, blossoming willow tree. The breeze stirs the draping limbs and pale flower petals shimmer as they tumble through the air. The White Queen sits in the midst of the delicate shower, speaking softly to no one. Although, oddly enough, Hamish suddenly finds himself imagining that the tree itself is talking back.

Impossible!

Or… is it?

It is, to be honest, a question for another time. This is the moment he has been waiting for and now he must take it.

The breeze settles and the tree limbs subside when Hamish takes a step closer. The world seems to hold its breath as he approaches with equal measures of contrition and reverence. He does not want his first words to be an apology, but he feels compelled to offer that very gesture to this remarkable woman who has been beyond patient with him.

And then inspiration strikes. Mindful of the jittery quality of twitterpation, Hamish carefully removes the glass slipper from his coat pocket and, clearing his throat, he says not an apology, but a proposal instead: “I believe it is my destiny to share my life with the woman whose foot fits this slipper.”

The White Queen turns toward him. Her expression is as open as ever, but she clutches the mossy ropes of the swing very tightly in her hands. Perhaps she is as nervous as he? Dare he hope for the same reasons?

“If you would permit me…?” he continues, indicating the slipper in his hands.

Wordlessly, the White Queen extends a pale, bare foot in his direction. Throat suddenly tight, he bridges the distance between them and reaches out to steady her heel with the palm of one hand. He does not crassly glance beneath her skirts to see if he can glimpse the glass slipper’s mate upon her other foot. He somehow knows it is still there.

Hamish hesitates as he lifts the lost article to slide it into place and, looking up, meets her gaze. “I
have missed you terribly, and I have only myself to blame.”

“Hush,” she answers, one hand sliding from the rope and gently cupping his chin. “You are here now.”

Yes, he is. He concurs with a relieved smile.

“To stay?” she presses in a voice that would make a whisper seem like a shout.

“On my honor,” Hamish vows, “I will never leave you willingly if you can forgive my rash actions and cowardice.”

She smiles and his heart pounds in response to the glow of hope he sees in her fathomless eyes. “There is nothing to forgive, my precious one.”

And then, smiling, Hamish places the slipper gently upon her foot. Of course it fits. He glances down and smiles at the sight of the glass shoe upon her foot in the late afternoon sunlight.

Relief and hope make him giddy and he speaks the first thought which pops into his head.

“I believe this is much like a story I heard as a child,” Hamish volunteers, still cradling the White Queen’s be-slippered foot. “Once the shoe was placed upon her foot, the man and woman could not be separated again.”

“And the shoe?” Mirana asks softly and with great interest. “What was its fate?”

Truthfully, Hamish has never given it a second thought, but now, as he considers it, it seems only right to say— “I imagine its path took both it and its mate to many interesting places, on many grand adventures.”

Mirana holds out her pale hand and inquires, “And what of you, my dear Sir Hamish? What adventures do you seek?”

“None that I cannot partake in without you, you Majesty.”

“Mirana,” she corrects gently.

“My love,” Hamish argues back. And when he leans forward and pressed his lips to hers, she does not deny him. She is warm and wondrous and welcoming. Hamish is home.

*~*~*~*~*

In all the years they have been wed, Tarrant has never spent a night away from Alice. Tonight is no exception.

He arrives late, long after Diana and Edan have been put to bed, and Alice waits in the kitchen – soaking her aching feet in a basin of warm water which Tarrant had insisted upon fetching from the bath house for her – as he looks in on his daughter and son.
“Only pleasant dreams?” she asks him when he returns and sinks down beside her on the cushioned bench. He wraps a dusty-smelling arm around her shoulders and tucks her against his body.

“Oh, yes,” he lisps softly. “Spun sugar and sprinklings of cinnamon.”

Alice smiles. Despite her exhaustion – and looking after two rambunctious children for the majority of the day, and with a third occasionally kicking and shifting in her belly, is exhausting and she’s very glad Tarrant rarely makes the trip to Marmoreal anymore – she feels utterly content.

“And how was your day?”

“Full of deliverance,” he replies with humor.

“Of the hat kind?” she presses.

Tarrant leans his head against hers and elaborates, “And of the homecoming kind.”

“Hamish was well-received?”

Tarrant hums softly. “Oh, yes. So well-received that he may never be released again.”

Alice takes a breath, intending to press for details, but pauses when Tarrant reaches for his satchel and removes a wrapped parcel from it. He places it upon the kitchen table for Alice to open, which she does with periodic, questioning glances sent his way. Only Tarrant’s sparkling, green eyes hint that there is something pleasing to be found within, so she removes the paper covering it and finds herself staring at—

“Oh, no,” she breathes out in an odd mix of anticipation and horror.

“I’m afraid so, my Alice.”

Alice sets the framed photograph down upon the tabletop and turns away from the image of the three people therein. While it is wonderful to have their wedding photo back again, Alice knows it could only mean one thing.

“She will marry him.”

“It’s rather a foregone conclusion.”

Alice sighs, feeling put-upon, but also happy about it. “I’ll have to call him ‘your Majesty’, won’t I?”

“I think, for you, he would make an exception,” Tarrant consoles her, grinning so widely she rather thinks he’d be able to speak with his ears.

“It’s too bad about the rest of it,” Alice muses, playfully baiting her husband.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“You’d best be on the lookout for when Hamish realizes it really has been only five years and a bit since we last saw him.”

Tarrant has the audacity to grin. “An’ tha’ time comes, I’ll b’ ver’ pleased teh let him see how ver’ much I luv mae wife.” And when Tarrant places his hand upon her belly and whispers hotly in her ear, Alice can’t bring herself to mind. Her husband is charming and gentle and caring and kind – he is also mad and audacious and stubborn and incorrigible – and she would not have
he is also mad and audacious and stubborn and incorrigible – and she would not have him any other way.

A year later, the White Queen and her consort, Sir Hamish, wed. The ceremony is elaborate and breathtaking. Alice stands beside Tarrant as they listen to the exchange of vows. Diana, holding onto Alice’s hand, twirls a bit back and forth and back and forth, playing with the ribbons on her sun hat. Edan clings to his papa’s knees, giggling to himself at all the strange people in their midst. Amelia – exhausted from all the hullabaloo – dozes in her father’s arms. It is a beautiful moment, a perfect moment, and Alice marvels that she is sharing it with her husband and their children.

She huffs out a sigh in mock irritation. Blast it all. Not only is she going to have to call Hamish “your Majesty” but she’s going to have to thank him as well, because – without his friendship – none of this would have been possible.

Oddly enough, when she mentions this to the White King after congratulating him on his marriage, he chuckles warmly and replies, “I could say the same, Cousin Alice.”

She smiles back and retorts, “Then why don’t you, Cousin Hamish?”

Once again, that haughty look is back as he banter, “I believe I just did.”

Alice isn’t sure how many of his subjects would dare to roll their eyes at him, but she’s sure it’s a select few.

She documents the day in a series of sketches which take her weeks to complete in between bedtimes and baths and the learning of letters and maths, but when they are done, they are sent off to their new homes. One illustration finds itself atop the mantle beside Alice and Tarrant’s wedding photograph in Iplam. Another is framed and hung in a place of reverence in Marmoreal Palace. And a third, with a little help from a smiling tabby cat, makes its way to London where it is regarded with perplexity – but only briefly! – before Lady Ascot proudly announces her new connection to royalty.

There are many more sketches which are delivered over the years, for there is no end to the joy to be found in a wonderful, impossible place called Underland.

The End