The Envelope, a novel

by Manniness

Summary

When Alice Kingsleigh next encounters the rabbit hole she knows precisely what - and whom! - she wants!

This is a full-length work based on my short story of the same name: "The Envelope"

Fandom: Tim Burton’s Alice in Wonderland (2010) AND Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" & "Through the Looking Glass"
Kiss Me

The rabbit hole.

Yes, it had been a bit hard for Alice to miss it. It had gaped at the base of the wizened, twisted old tree, yawning wide and whisperingly. It had stared back at her with all the weight of an infinite abyss.

Of course she had seen it.

Luckily, her lunch companion had not.

“Let’s eat over here, shall we?” he had nearly—but-not-quite decreed (it had been a statement more than a question and phrased with the smallest hint of rising intonation only because he is fully aware of how Alice feels about his bossier tendencies) and then he had gestured a bit further down the trail toward a patch of invitingly golden sunlight.

Alice had – perhaps uncharacteristically – readily agreed.

And she had promptly allowed that rabbit hole – just a momentary dash away! – to consume her every thought. Could it be the same one she had fallen down so long ago? Could it still be an entrance to Underland? Could it be her gateway once again to that mystical land with its mad creatures and her much-missed and oft-dreamed of friend, the Hatter?

Oh, she hopes...!

“Alice!”

“Hm?”

She looks up and Hamish gives her a weak glare. “Have you even heard a word I’ve said?”

“Of course.” Her own name, just now.

He fidgets tellingly. Alice gulps. Oh, blast. The man had proposed again, hadn’t he? It’s becoming a bit of a ritual: every time her ship docks in port, here he is with some attempt at a vaguely romantic diversion and that same damn question.

“I’m sorry, Hamish,” she begins and then hurriedly continues when his look turns obstinate. “I’ve only just arrived! Perhaps if I had a chance to settle in and think it over...” Although she knows what her answer will be; the two of them have grown no more inclined to suit one another over the years.

Somewhat mollified, Hamish replies, “I shall look forward to your acceptance this time, Alice.”

She snorts. Honestly, how can he think she would ever accept? Hamish, of course, misunderstands her humor – as he always does. She diverts the imminent male posturing, blustering and inevitable accusations with a challenge of her own, “Honestly, Hamish. What in the world would you want with an old spinster like me? You know I would be more than happy to loan you the funds you require, and at a very reasonable interest rate...”

Predictably, his nose thrusts high into the air. And it’s a good thing the man is obsessed with keeping handkerchiefs available for tending to it or he might have been flashing rather unseemly nostrils about in public.
A travesty, surely.

“This is not about money.”

“Of course. How crass of me to suggest otherwise.”

He sighs. “Yes, well, after all these years, I’ve come to expect that from you.”

Yes, she supposes he has.

He counters the moment of awkward silence by consulting his pocket watch. Alice stares at the time piece and remembers another pocket watch and the creature that had tapped it impatiently before disappearing into this very wood so long ago.

“You’ve made me late,” he announces.

Alice smiles. “Then you go on. I’ll clean up our picnic things and follow behind you.”

He bristles. “It would be most ungentlemanly for me to simply leave you here to—!”

“I insist,” she replies firmly. “You are a busy man, Lord Ascot. I – of all people – know the importance of keeping a well-ordered schedule.” Mostly because she has been dreadfully late for one thing or another most of her life. “Go on and see to your next appointment.”

“Thank you, Alice.” He hesitates for a moment and then, brazenly, leans forward and gives her a quick peck on the cheek. “You understand better than anyone else, you know.”

“And that’s why you keep asking me to marry you?” she muses with a wry grin.

“Precisely.”

She watches him go as she blindly reaches for the plates and platters and cups and spoons... and as soon as he has disappeared down the forest path, Alice gathers her skirts up and rushes back to the old tree and the gaping rabbit hole.

“Could you be the same one?” she asks it.

For years, she has dreamed of stumbling across it again. In fact, upon anticipating the conclusion of her first trip abroad, Alice had fully intended to seek it out and dive down into the world she knows exists there. But then, when she had, at last, set foot upon English soil, she had found her sister abandoned by that cheating rotter, Lowell, and her mother’s health failing, and so Alice had put off the search for this rabbit hole and had returned to work with the company. Time – *years* – had passed before Alice had thought to seriously question her reasons for delaying her return to Underland. It had come to her on her thirtieth birthday that the reason she – now a successful business woman in her own right – had still hesitated to seek out that mystical portal had had nothing to do with obligations to her now-very-comfortable family.

No, she knows why she had not sought out this rabbit hole: she had feared being unable to find it. And if she had *not* found it, what then? Well, the most *logical* conclusion would be this: her failure would be due to the fact that there *is* no magical rabbit hole to find at all... because Underland really *had* been nothing more than a dream.

No. No! She had not been able to bear the thought. Nor had she been capable of allowing her heart to break that way. She *needs* to Believe...

But now... now it is a moot point. For the rabbit hole *is here!* She has found it again!
And even at the age of thirty-three, she longs for that crazy, mad, wonderful world.

“Could you be the same one?” she repeats, gazing into the inky depths. “Yes,” she answers. “I Believe you are.”

And then she closes her eyes...

… and dives headfirst into it.

The fall is as frightening as it is familiar. The book shelves and bureaus, the musty brass bed and ill-tuned piano... She remembers to throw up her arms in front of her face an instant before she hits the bottom... or rather the floor of the Room of Doors and crashes through it then smacks into the ceiling. She reaches out, scrambles for the chandelier – all the candles now long since melted to nothing but thorny, black wicks – but before she can get a grip on the fixture, gravity reverses and she lands with a lung-emptying thud! on the good-as-new (if rather dusty) floor.

“Ow,” she declares to the room, wondering at the soft, eerie glow which inexplicably emanates from the unlit chandelier above her head... like a memory of candlelight.

And when she sits up she looks no further than the table and the bottle of Pishsalver with its crackly and yellowed label and faded writing. The key is beside it and the glass box of Upelkuchen is under the table and just there is the door with the lock that fits the key and—!

“Argh!” Alice gasps, stumbling back. She presses a hand over her pounding, panicking heart and stares at the figure slumped next to the small door.

The figure... of a man.

Once, he had been sitting in a chair, but it had seemingly disintegrated out from under him. Its remains are pinned beneath him and scattered across the floor. Now he slumps against the wall, his legs at a slightly uncomfortable-looking angle, his head bowed but his hat unmoved.

His hat...

“Hat... Hatter?” Alice whispers. Belatedly, she realizes that the whisper is useless – if he had not roused when she had crashed through the ceiling... or floor... or what-have-you, then he is not about to respond to so subtle a sound!

Alice takes a deep breath and moves toward him. Her heart pounds anew – with dull thumps of dread this time – at the sight of him, so silent and unresponsive and slouched like this. She does not want to acknowledge what that might mean! He is... Her Hatter is...

Alive!

Alice sighs out a thankful breath as she tentatively touches the back his hand. Ah, his hand. His wonderful, un-decayed-or-rotting-or-even-cold hand! She presses her palm to his skin and curls her fingers around his and marvels: he is warm and his flesh is firm and his skin is taut with lingering youth.

“Hatter?” she tries again.

Again, he does not answer. In fact, he does not even appear to be breathing.

Gently, she removes his hat and sets it aside. She has never seen him – or any other man for that matter – asleep and she finds herself mesmerized. Beneath his color-smudged eyelids, there is no
movement or hint of awareness, and yet she suspects he is there. Waiting.

For her?

She doesn’t dare hope... Why, it would be the very height of arrogance to presume...!

She reaches out and, grasping his shoulder, shakes him gently.

“Hatter?”

Nothing. He continues slouching and not breathing.

“Underland,” she curses, irritated with the utter illogical-ness of the situation. “Welcome back, Alice,” she mocks. “Here’s a lovely gift for you.” She gestures grandly toward the Hatter but he does not appreciate the effort. She huffs and glances around the room as if she might find the culprit who had created this scenario conveniently waiting for her to vent her frustrations upon it. “Contrary, mad, impossible...”

Her grumbles die into silence as she turns back to her—er, rather the Hatter. And, oh yes, it is good to see him again... she just wishes he were a bit more... lively. Well, perhaps there is a riddle in this, too. Perhaps she is not looking hard enough. So, look she does. Her cursory survey of the Hatter’s person – his jacket and kilt (why would he still be wearing that?) – yields something... interesting. There, peeking out from within his left breast, inner jacket pocket, is a corner of something white. Or nearly white.

“I beg your pardon, Hatter,” she mutters – just in case he is listening! – and reaches for it.

“An envelope?”

Frowning, Alice turns it over in her hands and finds that it is... “Addressed to me?” Brows raised in disbelief, she glances back at the Hatter’s slack face... then back at the letter and its slanted and spidery, masculine script. “So you were waiting for me?” She reaches out and touches his face, cups his cheek as she had once done so long ago. Her hand is a better fit for it now that she’s the proper size, although it is not nearly as youthful as it had once been.

“I’m so very late. And so very sorry,” she chokes out.

And, again, when he does not respond, she has no other recourse except to turn back to the envelope in her hands. Taking a deep breath, she does what one would logically do with an envelope addressed to oneself: she opens it.

A small card rests within and the edges crumble even though she is careful as she pulls it halfway out. On the aged parchment, she finds two words:

*Kiss me.*

She snorts. “Well, this is a bit of a diversion from the expected, wouldn’t you say?” she asks him. She sighs when she gets no response.

She looks back at the words and purses her lips in speculation.

*Kiss me.*

Well, really, what could be the harm in trying? Besides, she knows it is best to follow instructions
in Underland. They tend to be the most expeditious method, in the end.

Her pulse races and Alice licks her lips nervously as she realizes what it is she is seriously considering doing. No, what she is about to do! Holding the envelope and the instructions cautiously in one hand, she lifts the other and tilts the Hatter’s chin upward. She gazes at those dark lips and the hint of his widely-spaced front teeth beyond them. How many times has she imagined this very moment? Albeit with a bit more participation on his part...

His eyes are still closed and his muscles completely lax. It feels a bit like a betrayal, kissing him without his conscious consent. She takes another fortifying breath, checks the instruction once more to see if the letters have somehow rearranged themselves since she’d last checked...

*Kiss me.*

She sighs. “All right.”

And then she leans closer to him, ignoring the dust crawling up her skirt and the ache of her knees against the hard floor. Alice gazes once more at his closed eyes, his high cheekbones, his unsmiling mouth...

Unable to delay any longer, she presses her lips to his.

For a breathless moment, nothing happens. She begins to panic: perhaps she is doing it incorrectly, according to Underlandian standards? She struggles to remember seeing even one kiss during her previous visit (and also her childhood ones!) but comes up empty. Daringly, she parts her lips a bit, nibbles softly at his, brazenly touches her tongue to that space between his lips, and then...

And then...!

His lips answer. They stir, pucker, reach and press against hers. His chest expands with a deep breath and he leans toward her – eyes still firmly closed (she knows this because she checks) – and she shivers when his tongue, soft and warm, dares to dip between her lips... as quick as lightning and as profound as a thunder clap!

She shudders and his hands reach for her. His fingers curl around her upper arms. He leans away, briefly, eyes still closed. “Please,” he lisps on a rasp, “*please* be Alice...”

“I am,” she whispers back, not wanting to move away but thinking she must now – for propriety’s sake, at least. “I am absolutely Alice.”

His lips stretch into a wide grin and his eyelashes flutter and then Alice finds herself staring into eyes that truly are every bit as impossibly green as she has imagined, every day, over the past fourteen years. “Alice...” he muses, remarks, summarizes, proclaims.

The Hatter leans forward, his gaze on her mouth and his hands still grasping her close, and then he stops. “Oh... oh! I—!”

The jumble of intentions is familiar to her and she recalls several occasions during her previous visit when he had behaved thusly...

This time, she knows better than to let him retreat. She places her hands – one still holding the envelope – on his chest and leans in to press a lingering kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Hatter...” she murmurs in invitation. Alice turns just the smallest bit toward him as he – groaning softly – accepts.

She feels his legs dragging at her skirt as he shifts and then urges her up and closer yet. She
complies, her heart pounding (although not with panic or dread this time!) as she dares to plant one knee on either side of his hips. Her acceptance seems to do something to him – something powerful – and suddenly, he is feasting upon her mouth with single-minded, furious intensity and his masculine whines – needy and breathless – make her gasp.

For a moment, she marvels at her own stupidity: how could she have spent fourteen years denying herself this passion? This moment? This man? And then his hands drop to her uncorsetted waist and pull her closer even as his hips thrust toward her.

“Ah!” she declares at the feel of his presence there between her thighs and pressing against the cradle of her hips.

His fingers twitch and his grasp loosens. He leans away, his green eyes wide and brows arched. Before he can apologize for being so forward, Alice reaches for his hand and places it squarely over her breast, his fingertips brushing against the buttons of her blouse.

He groans. “Oh, aye, mae wee little boy... Aye...”

Alice shivers as he lifts his other hand and sets to the task of relieving her blouse buttons of their restraints. He nuzzles against her throat. His breath is warm and his lips are soft and his teeth are tantalizingly gentle. And when her blouse gapes open and he hesitantly fits one trembling hand to the curve of her breast, even through the fabric of her shift, the heat of his fingers burns and blazes and, moaning, she leans into his touch.

“Hatter, please...”

Her hips rock against his without her conscious intent. Her belly feels strangely, achingly empty and she hungers for more...

“Alice, sae sorry,” he mumbles between worshipful kisses along her bare neck and collarbone. “Nae bed te b’ had... an’ I’ve e’en lost mae chair...”

“I don’t care.”

He giggles and she smiles at the rhyme. Her eyes open and she gazes into his as his hands cup her breasts. She pants and presses closer, reaching for the fabric of her skirt to pull it out of the way. Yes, she knows very well what she’s doing – what they are doing. Alice may not have any... practical experience at this, but she is a grown woman and a well-traveled one at that. She has seen pagan artwork of couplings and read deliciously explicit texts concerning this very act.

He wiggles a bit beneath her and his kilt rides up until she can feel the heat of his bare hips against her skin, through the thin undergarments she wears. She has a fleeting wish for both he and she to be perfectly bare, but then his thumbs pass over her aching nipples and her thoughts scatter. She rocks toward him and feels his length slide against her and touch her... there, through the slit in her drawers.

She shudders.

“Half,” he says with surprising coherence, firmness, and care. He collects her left hand with his right, raises it to his lips, and presses soft kisses to her wrist, her knuckles, her fingertips. Inexplicably, she feels tears gather in her eyes at his tender attentions, so different from the wild passion of his earlier kisses. His other hand moves to her waist again, urges her a bit forward and she feels him press against her again. Daringly, she wiggles her hips a bit until he is precisely where he ought to be. And then she presses down and a bit forward, taking him in just the smallest bit.
His throat works and his breath whistles but he doesn’t look away from her gaze. She pauses to appreciate the feel of it – alien and yet so familiar – as they come together for this first time. Like her, he seems to be marveling at the sensation, and makes no move to rush. And when she begins to become accustomed to him that far within her, she tilts her hips a bit further and takes him a bit deeper.

His breaths become heavier and his eyes even more unfocused, but he does not close them or look away. He swallows but no sounds emerge from his throat, for this – Alice understands – is not the time for words. The only thing she wishes – at this exact moment – to share with him is this feeling.

Alice pauses again and her thighs tremble; she wants to seat herself completely but no, not quite yet. She expects there will be pain, so she prepares for it, reminds herself that tensing will only make it worse. She takes a deep breath, smiles for both him and herself, and then pushes her hips flush against his.

The pain... is non-existent. The romantic in her reminds her: how could she ever, for even one mad moment, think that there would be pain between her and her Hatter? Of course there wouldn’t. Because they – and this moment – are meant to be. The thought makes her stomach tighten and the Hatter gasps. Pleasure or heat or whatever he feels at this moment of their joining, has split his gaze in twain. She doubts he can see her – or anything – clearly, his eyes are so out of alignment. But he proves his lucidity with his next breath:

“Alice...”

She hears a desperate request in his tone, so she does it again: tightens her muscles around him.

“Ungh!” he informs her, his hips pushing briefly and mindlessly against hers.

He goes deeper then and the friction makes her gasp. He is inside her. Moving inside her. The thought is so compelling she becomes a slave to it instantly. “Yes,” she encourages him, thrusting against him as he moves again into her. He slumps a bit against the wall, bracing his shoulders and bending his knees behind her and the next time they come together is the deepest, the hottest, the best yet.

Alice gasps and he chokes on a whine and their bodies borrow a rhythm from ageless instinct. It feels so... absolute. So total. Alice despairs when her legs begin to tire and her knees ache. She wants more, for although she does not feel the rapturous joy she had seen on the faces of the sculptures surrounding the pagan temples of India and further east, she can imagine the pleasure this might bring if only she could... if only... just a bit more and...!

“Klotchen,” the Hatter growls a moment before he wraps his arms around her waist and rolls to the side. Alice gasps as he looms over her. She is flat on her back and he is above her and still within her and...

He thrusts and the feeling is so perfect she fears she will lose her mind. She pushes against him, grabs his jacket lapels and brings her knees up and he goes deeper yet! But there is something about this position – his freedom of movement, perhaps, or the way he cages her against the floor – that brings that unspeakable pleasure within her reach.

“Hatter!” she gasps, feeling her body tighten without her consent.

“Ngh!” he replies on an incoherent whine, his lips mouthing her name in silence.

And when the end comes, Alice does not immediately recognize it as such. She fears she is
experiencing heart failure. Her lungs ache and her throat locks and every muscle in her body tenses...!

And then she is breathing again, panting, and her toes are tingling and the Hatter is pressed against her, holding her close as his hips drive against her faster and faster. Alice turns toward his wild, orange hair, nuzzles his neck and somehow finds the strength to hold her knees high and wide to accommodate him.

“Alice...!” he breathes, shocked and panting, in her ear. His hips pause, thrust once more, and then stop.

She pets his hair and his shoulders as he struggles to catch his breath. She hooks her ankles together at the small of his back and simply feels. He is heavy, pressing her down, and he is still inside her and he had spent himself inside her and Alice is aware of what that could mean but it does nothing to interfere with the smug, feminine satisfaction of having pleased him, of having had him for herself, of having taken him into her own body. She would liken the feeling to ownership except that she has never felt blessed or humbled by the fact that she possesses a fine house in the country or works of art by many Italian and Parisian masters...

This feeling is better than owning or having baubles or trifles or other pretty things. It is more.

She basks in it until his weight becomes uncomfortable and she can feel him sliding out of her. But before Alice can fidget, he braces himself on his hands and leans back. When he breathes out her name again, it is on a sigh of relief and in the tone of thanks. He kisses her and, smiling, she kisses him back.

Still, she cannot find a single word to say to him. She watches as he fumbles for a handkerchief and eases himself out of her completely. Alice lays back and sighs happily as he gently wipes away the mess on her thighs and then tends to himself. As he does so, kneeling, he glances toward her, his gaze a bit jittery and his brows a bit scrunched with apprehension.

Alice forces herself to sit up. She presses against his side, wraps an arm around his waist, and rubs her cheek against his shoulder. He sighs again and it is a happy sound.

She opens her eyes and a square of white parchment, lying in stark contrast on the dirty floor a few feet away, catches her gaze. She makes no move to retrieve it. Examining the envelope, which she had dropped at some point, she finally locates a few words that ought to be said. “You waited for me and I’m so very late,” she apologizes.

The Hatter scoots closer to her and reciprocates her gesture by wrapping an arm around her waist. “You are quite late,” he acknowledges, considering the rotted remains of the chair. “Naughty!”

Alice blushes at the hot look he gives her.

“But, in truth, I do not recall the wait. I was asleep, I believe.”

“You were,” she confirms. “Very deeply asleep.”

He nods. “The queen promised it would be so: I drank the potion and fell asleep here, in my chair, to wait for your return.” And then he giggles. “I’m so very glad you followed the instruction card!”

Alice raises a brow, glances at the discarded envelope and then back at him. She gives him a quick once-over before smirking. “That... and a bit more.”

He cackles and hugs her closer. “Aye, ye exceeded mae expectations, Alice,” he murmurs warmly
and she melts against him; she has never felt more cherished. And then he sober. His gaze moves over her, cataloging with rather intimidating efficiency. “I knew I would have to wait, despite what you’d said.” There is no accusation in his tone, only acceptance. “I tried not to know it. But I did know it, Alice.” His brows twitch in apology. “That’s when I asked for the chair and the potion and permission to wait for you here. I expected it might be a year... but you’ve exceeded those expectations as well, haven’t you?”

He reaches out and touches the corner of her mouth, where she knows laugh lines have begun to deepen. She lifts her own hand to his face and the crow’s feet that grow from the far corner of each of his eyes. “Yes, it was more than a year,” she admits, wondering if they are the same age now.

He grins and she can’t help smiling at his gap-toothed expression of joy. “But never mind! And never matter! You are here now!” And then his smile droops and he whispers cautiously, “To stay?”

“Yes,” she answers confidently, thinking of the life of luxury she had left behind – her legacy and her gift to her family. Yes, they will miss her, but she needs this. Him. She Needs him. And it’s long past time she allowed herself to give in to her desires. “I’ll stay.”

Sighing with contentment, the Hatter wraps his arms around her and leans back against the wall. There, they doze for a time. Occasionally, Alice stirs and rubs her hand over his jacket and vest, breathes in his scent, acquaints her cheek with his warmth. And when the first rumblings of her stomach are promptly answered by his, he – giggling – helps her stand and then reassembles her blouse (which leads to a bit more kissing and some wandering hands and even a bit of squealing and delighted chuckles) and Alice returns the favor by replacing his hat upon his head (again, this process takes a good deal longer than it had the last time she had done him this small favor... and she quite enjoys herself and his amorous attentions, truth be told) before the Hatter collects the key from the table and the bottle of Pishsalver. Alice places the Upelkuchen – still in its glass box – on the floor beside the door.

“Are ye ready, my Alice?” he burrs softly.

Alice glances from the tiny door to the remains of the long-decayed chair beside it and the long-burnt-out candles of the chandelier above their heads and nods. Yes, she is ready. Finally. At long last, she is looking forward to opening that door and emerging into the world beyond it. But first...

Alice steps over to the remains of the chair and collects the envelope from the ruins. Returning to the Hatter’s side, she gives him a knowing smirk and carefully tucks the envelope (and the instruction card it still contains) back into his inner jacket pocket.

“Yes,” she says, basking in the Hatter’s luminous expression. “Now, I’m ready.”

And thus it happens that Alice Kingsleigh – no longer alone and no longer believing herself to be in a dream or a nightmare – turns to face the door to Underland once more.

*~*~*~*~*

Alice gently lifts the small, brass key from the Hatter’s palm, ticking his skin quite deliberately and grinning at his helpless giggle, and then, kneeling, applies it to the lock on the miniature door.

“I do believe we may be overlooking a rather sizable issue,” the Hatter cautiously reminds her.

She glances up, grinning. “Oh, I haven’t forgotten,” she assures him. “This is something of a tradition for me; this first glance into the garden on the other side.”
“Ah!” he declares… and promptly gets down on the floor beside her. “In this case, two heads are also better than one!”

Laughing, Alice turns the key, tugs open the tiny door…

And gasps as churning, rushing water *explodes* toward them through the portal.

For a moment that feels unequivocally eternal, Alice merely gapes, her mind stuttering with incomprehension at the torrent. The Hatter is equally still and stiff with disbelief as the water spills into the room between them. And then, before she has really processed the situation – a slight to her ego which the businesswoman in her, who prides herself on her quick thinking and ingenuity, may never forgive – the Hatter lurches into the spray and scrambles for the open door.

“How much water is out there?” she wheezes in frantic disbelief. “What…? How…? Underland!”

“I ken,” the Hatter replies, grasping Alice’s upper arms tightly even as he glares with iridescently yellow eyes at the water which continues to froth and foam as it gushes inside.

Alice longs for a moment to ask the Hatter what Underland had been like when he’d last seen it, but she fears that they do not have time for that. “Is there another way out of the Room of Doors?” she asks instead, mindful of the cold water now swirling around her knees. “One of these that we can open?” she has the presence of mind to clarify with a wild gesture toward the other doors.

This directs his attention away from the door that has betrayed them. He glances at the other doors in a seemingly random order, his water-logged brows twitching. “I cannae recall,” he admits after a moment. “We shall have to make our own.”

Before Alice can ask him how, he glances at the wrought iron table with its glass top and then at the rising, churning water.

“Where was it you fell this time?” he asks, his voice sharp with urgency.

“Where I fell?” she repeats. “You mean where I crashed through the floor?”

“Yes, yes! Fell, crashed, smashed, broke, collided, ram—!”

“There!” Alice shouts over his increasingly hysterical rant. “On the far side of the table!”

She does not tell him she is unsure of the *precise* location. Doubting herself will not help them now. With one hand on his hat and the other still around Alice’s arm, he slogs through the spinning water currents. “Here?” he inquires.

Alice squashes her doubt and nods.
“Excellent!” He now reaches for the table and directs, “You on one side and I on the other. May the room forgive us for reopening old wounds, but I dare say that – considering the alternative – our actions are permissible!”

Understanding his intent, Alice helps him drag the heavy table over to the recently-broken and magically-repaired area of the floor. Praying that she has remembered the exact location correctly and knowing that the Hatter will need her help, she tightens her grasp around the edge of the table.

“Oh the count of three!” the Hatter warns her and Alice nods, bracing herself. They lift the table as high as they can and then…

“Five… four… three!”

The water resists them, splashes them mightily and the resulting waves push at them, but Alice throws her weight into the downward motion of the table, as does the Hatter. Her left shoulder crashes into his right over the tabletop as the legs slam into the floor. Alice glances up at him, panting and ready to suggest that they try again…

But then the tiles crack beneath her feet. She can feel edges of ceramic against the fabric and soles of her shoes. Alice has just enough time to look into the Hatter’s anxious, yellow eyes and then the table is grabbed away from them. An instant later, Alice feels the grip of the water on her feet as she is dragged beneath the surface with a gasp.

In her lifetime, Alice has wondered what it would be like to fly, what it would be like to kiss the Hatter, to make love, to return to Underland, but she has never wondered what it would be like to be sucked down a drain while choking on dirty water.

Perhaps she should have. She might have been better prepared for this.

Alice resists the impulse to open her eyes. She clamps both hands around her nose and mouth and curls her body into a ball as the water carries her away. She has no impression of where she is now. She can only hope that this is the rabbit hole on the Ascot estate and both she and the Hatter are riding upwards. She can only pray that he has not been left behind, trapped in the Room of Doors.

Please please please please...

There is no room in her helpless panic for any other thought. The water pushes and pulls at her like a pair of impatient toddlers (and yes, she remembers that experience well!) slamming her against this and that: walls and large objects that she cannot risk opening her eyes to identify. Her lungs burn and her throat aches with the need to cough up the bit of water she’d inadvertently swallowed. And then – just when she is sure that the next time she bumps against something, she will lose her grip on her mouth, gasp for air, fill up her lungs and drown! – Alice lets out a cry as the darkness falls away and there is light, a cold breeze, and hard-but-grass-covered ground pressing against her.

She rolls over roots and rocks, her dress and petticoats tangling in a soggy mass around her legs as she coughs and sputters. “Hat—!” She breaks off to retch on a rather unfortunately placed dandelion. “Hatter!”

And then the rushing in her ears subsides and she hears someone else hacking and wheezing nearby. She scrubs at her eyes, clearing them of water and mud and other muck even as she, wobblingly, sits up.

“Hatter!” she rasps, seeing him lying prone on the ground only a few steps away, panting-
gasping—swearing-in-Outlandish up at the sky. Her relief makes her knees even weaker than they
already are and Alice contents herself with crawling to his side.

“Are you—” She glances away to cough weakly. “Are you all—?”

“I’ve yet—” Cough. “—to take inventory—” Wheeze. “—but I believe so…”

“Your hat is missing,” she reluctantly informs him as he cautiously sits up and then vigorously
shakes his head, sending water droplets every which way.

“It will find me later,” he mutters absently as he inspects the immediate vicinity. “How strange…”

“What is?”

“This place! Why, not a single drop of water floated away. One always does, you know.”

Alice smiles wistfully. “I would have liked to have seen that…”

The Hatter glances around with more purpose this time. “Alice, do you happen to know where,
precisely, is Here?”

She takes a moment to survey her surroundings and when she spies the corner of the picnic
blanket in the distance, beside the trail, Alice’s suspicions are confirmed. She experiences a
moment of shock, however: so much has happened since lunchtime! She glances at the Hatter, at
his kilt and mismatched stockings and the pocket watch he’s now squinting at.

“Welcome to Upland,” she tells him, marveling that he is here with her. In all her daydreaming,
she had never imagined this. “And yes, I know precisely where we are: we’re—”

“Alice?”

Both she and the Hatter startle at the sound of that abrupt and squeaky gasp. Alice turns and,
there, over her shoulder, stands her lunch date from earlier. And he looks thoroughly
gobsmacked.

“Hello, Hamish,” Alice returns as she considers the effort required to stand up in garments
weighed down with water.

She wonders if Hamish had actually seen her and the Hatter erupt out of the rabbit hole. He must
have because, if she’s not mistaken, that bug-eyed, slack-jawed, utterly blank expression is the
harbinger of an Episode.

“I—you—that—! Not possible—!” he chokes, too stunned to gesticulate.

“Hamish, slow down and breathe before you speak,” Alice commands. She glances at the Hatter
and then toward the gnarled old tree. The rabbit hole is still there and the ground around it is wet,
but there’s no sign of the source. The water seems to have gone down again now that the pressure
had been released.

When she returns her attention to the lord of the land, he seems to be taking her advice. At least
partially. He is breathing more, yes, but it’s clear that he hasn’t managed to start thinking
properly. “Nearly—not fifteen minutes and—what—!”

Waiting for him to regain his equilibrium could take all day, Alice muses. Granted, if he had seen
the earth spit them out through the rabbit hole, he would be owed that time…and then some. But
on second thought, she doesn’t think he had seen it. Not once does he glance in the direction of
the gnarled tree or the portal at its base. His mind seems to be rather stuck on her inexplicably soaked and muddy appearance. The man is – and always has been – thoroughly (and unfortunately) logical. Even if he had seen their emergence through the rabbit hole, he will no doubt convince himself of the exact opposite. That is not to say that Hamish lacks imagination… but his imagination does not run toward fantastical, impossible things. Like Alice’s.

She silently thanks the Hatter for that; without him and his sage advice on the battlefield all those years ago she might have been equally practical. How horrid! Alice spares a mischievous grin and a wink for the Hatter, who is watching Hamish’s approach with wide, green eyes.

“You nearly—what with—an episode, Alice!” he finally articulates with some semblance of coherency. Drawing a deep breath, he calms enough to accuse, “Imagine turning the corner and seeing…! And hearing—babbling of the worst—!” Hamish blusters. “And who is this… fellow? And why are the pair of you sopping wet and covered in mud and—?”

“Lord Ascot,” Alice interrupts in That Tone. The one that she’d adopted from Lady Ascot, interestingly enough, in order to better manage the woman’s son. “Are you more interested in asking questions or in hearing answers?”

“I… the answers, naturally, madam!”

“Then I suggest you give us time to provide them.”

Hamish glares briefly, his dignity clearly wounded in the presence of another male. One which Alice is permitting to actively assist her in getting to her feet. Now standing with his arms very chivalrously supporting her as she adjusts the sodden mass of cloth that had once been a skirt and petticoats, the Hatter glances over his shoulder at the remains of the picnic. His eyes narrow in thought… and he once more looks at Alice. Then he glances at Hamish, quirks a brow, and returns his attention to Alice again. This time, his look is expectant. She opens her mouth to explain away what clearly looks to be a romantic interlude in the forest, to reassure him that nothing had Happened here, before she’d tumbled down the rabbit hole and found her way under his kilt.

“What on earth happened to you, Alice?” Hamish inquires softly, suddenly, and with unprecedented succinctness.

The truth is out of the question, so she replies, “The lake happened to us.”

Hamish gapes. Alice wonders if his shock will last long enough for her to describe the exact nature of her relationship with Hamish to the Hatter, but, alas, it does not.

After only two attempts at speaking, Lord Ascot finally concludes, “That… is not possible, Alice. The lake is on the other side of the estate and I’ve only been gone a few moments…”

“Your appointment?” Alice wonders aloud, momentarily distracted from the predicament. The Hatter’s hand comes to rest rather possessively on her waist and she can’t help but enjoy it.

“Cancelled. Marshall was on his way to inform me,” Hamish replies with a dismissive (if somewhat twitchy) wave. His eyes narrow as he gives the Hatter a more thorough survey, from his scuffed and worn out boots all the way up to his matted and muddy orange hair. “But never mind that! Who is this man, Alice?”

Ah, an excellent question. One that Alice has been quite remiss in investigating, honestly. She had never been formally introduced to the Hatter and is ashamed to say that she’d never caught his proper name. Alice can’t very well tell Hamish that he is The Hatter… can she? But… upon
further reflection…

“This,” she informs him, raising a hand and scandalously placing it on the Hatter’s shoulder, “is the Hatter to the White Queen, Mirana of Marmoreal.”

“I… beg your pardon!” Hamish stammers.

Alice bites back a grin. She turns to her companion and, with a rueful smile that she shares only with the Hatter who appears to be rather surprisingly uncertain, says, “He didn’t believe me. Perhaps if you introduced yourself…?”

“Of course, Alice!” the Hatter replies readily, clearly happy to assist her. “Tarrant Hightopp,” he announces with brassy pride. “Royal Haberdasher to the White Queen!” Still grasping Alice’s waist with his right hand, he cautiously extends his left.

When Hamish merely stares at the offered hand, the Hatter whispers in an aside to Alice, “Have I misjudged the custom? Perhaps…” he muses before Alice can reassure him, “mayhap his kind e’en bite th’hand tha’ feeds them.”

“His kind?” Alice parrots.

“Oh, aye. The man cannae e’en speak the Queen’s English. ’Tis a ver’bad sign. Unfortunately irregular,” the Hatter informs her.

She snorts out a very unladylike laugh at the thought of an irregular Hamish. “Oh, no, no. I’m afraid Hamish is frightfully normal,” she whispers back. “He’s a business associate and a family friend. In fact, that’s his rabbit hole and—”

“Alice!” Hamish hisses urgently.

Startled, she looks up at the present Lord Ascot and is startled by his alarmed expression. He raises a hand and gestures frantically across the space separating them. “Step away from him, Alice.”

Choking on her own disbelief, Alice replies, “Whatever for?”

“That man,” Hamish stage-whispers, “is clearly a lunatic. Come over here this instant!”

Slowly, she shakes her head. What in the world…?

The Hatter’s hand tightens on her waist. “I d’nae trust him, Alice,” he burrs softly. “He’s wantin’ sommat from ye. Ne’er trust a man who cannae speak the Queen’s English.”

Alice raises her hands. “Stop it, the both of you.”

Amazingly, they both do. Hamish freezes mid-gesture. The Hatter pauses, his body very solid beside her despite the occasional shiver.

“Alice…” the Hatter hesitantly whispers, “you can understand everything that fellow says?”

“Quite clearly. Can’t you?” she asks, puzzled.

The Hatter shakes his head.

Hamish interjects into the moment, “Alice, this is no time for games! Who knows where that fellow has come from or what he wants! You are in danger. Now, step away!”
A moment of pure silence envelops the scene. Once Alice has blinked three times, glanced at the Hatter, and then focused once more on Hamish, she responds quite calmly, “I decline, Lord Ascot.”

“You… you…! That was not a request!” Hamish whispers hoarsely. “For your own safety, Alice, please employ some common sense! The man is clearly addled in some way!”

“Addled?!”

“Do I need to point out the obvious? He is speaking in tongues!”

Startled, Alice steps back into the Hatter’s embrace – the precise opposite of what Hamish had intended. Lord Ascot’s face reddens with frustration. Before he can explode and leave his elderly mother the tedious chore of raising William and James on her own, Alice announces, “But I can understand him!”

“Alice, that’s not possible—!”

Bloody non-believers! She looks at the Hatter and says, “Say something.”

He frowns at her. “Something.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Alice looks back at Hamish. “He’s perfectly comprehensible, Hamish. It’s you who is being stubborn.”

“The bloody hell I—!” Alice’s lifelong associate pauses, lifts a hand to the bridge of his nose, possibly contemplates the wringing of necks, and then mutters. “Why am I bothering? Mad woman…”

Alice grins, thoroughly and unrepentantly entertained.

By the time Hamish finally takes a deep breath, drops his hand, and opens his eyes, Alice has managed to school her expression into one of polite interest. He says with all the pompousness that he feels the situation warrants (which appears to be quite a lot), “Let us take this discussion back to the house. You’ll catch your death out here, soaked as you are.”

“Why thank you, Hamish. I was beginning to think you’d dropped your manners a good dozen paces behind you,” Alice tells him, leading the way to the trail from the grassy knoll. Tarrant keeps his hand (rather possessively) on her waist and his eyes on Hamish. Alice marvels silently that his concern could be so great that he doesn’t even object to leaving his hat behind… wherever it has got to.

“The invitation was not extended to him,” Hamish declares, deducing the undeniable fact that the Hatter intends to accompany Alice every step of the way.

Alice glares at him. “Lord Ascot, I am not leaving him out here.”

“Well, of course not!” he readily agrees. “I’ll have him very kindly escorted off the premises. I’m sure Marshall would be more than capable—”

“No.”
“No?”

“Would you truly be so inhospitable to my rescuer, Hamish?”

“Hm,” he replies and ungraciously relents. He refuses to lead the way, stubbornly keeping pace on Alice’s other side and as close to the Hatter as he dares. Alice rolls her eyes and marvels in silence: the trek down the trail earlier in the day had been long enough as Alice had been dreading yet another unwelcome marriage proposal. She recalls thinking that surely the trek back would seem faster. Oh, how wrong she is.

At the midway point, Alice decides that a dose of strategically placed normalcy is necessary and raises the issue of the abandoned picnic things. Hamish quickly assures her that he’ll send someone to collect them. And then, with this tentative truce established, he dares, “Alice, what on earth happened to you?”

“I told you, Hamish. The lake happened to us.”

“The lake, Alice? But how could you possibly…! I was only gone a few minutes and…!”

“Well, you explain it then, Hamish!” Alice challenges, dangerously close to losing her temper. She is wet and cold and worried about the Hatter and the fate of Underland and who bloody cares how they had ended up utterly sodden next to a rabbit hole? “Go on and give us a better explanation for why we look—” Alice trails off, gesturing to herself and the Hatter communicatively.

Sour-faced, Hamish admits, “I can’t.”

“Then the lake it is,” Alice declares.

Hamish sniffs. “You’re lying to me.”

“I am being logical, Hamish. Please take a moment to appreciate the difference.”

He glares briefly at the Hatter who, gamely, glares back. “And this man rescued you from drowning, then? In the lake that you couldn’t possibly have fallen into?”

“He saved my life,” she informs him and that is the truth!

Having known each other most of their lives, Hamish cannot deny the veracity of the claim. He says instead, “I won’t have this lunatic in the same house with my sons.”

“He’s a hatter, not a lunatic.”

“I see. And just what sort of hatters does this place – Marmer or some such – produce?”

“Marmoreal,” she corrects him.

Hamish archly raises a brow at this. “Know quite a bit about it, do you?”

“Not as much as the Hatter—” she begins.

“That I do not doubt,” Hamish mutters.

“But enough and I am seriously contemplating fetching a good, long stick to use for a bit of whipping if you do not cease this juvenile behavior at once!”

“It is not juvenile for a father to worry about his sons’ welfare while in close proximity to a man
Alice gapes at him. Then she looks at the Hatter, who returns her stare.

The Queen’s English. Oh, good gracious. Could that possibly be what the problem is here? Hamish’s queen is the Queen of England and the Hatter’s queen is the White Queen and…!

The implications of this are… staggering, indeed. Especially if Alice is correct. If her hunch is accurate, then why does she understand both of them? And why do both of them understand her?

Oh, bugger. This will surely give her a headache. Thankfully, the grand house with its equally grand bath tubs and steaming bathwater is now in sight.

“Hamish,” she says slowly and deliberately, pausing at the edge of the wood. “I will only say this once, so please heed me. I can understand the Hatter very clearly. Why this is the case, I am not sure. But I ask you to please accept that he is perfectly comprehensible and safe. I give you my word.”

Beside her, the Hatter frowns thoughtfully. Hamish studies her and then his uninvited guest before, at last, nodding. “I hope that your trust is not misplaced, Alice. For it may not be only you who suffers.”

Alice declines to concern herself with a reply. Hamish is being a complete and utter man and, thus, is not worthy of more time or effort on her part. She focuses on the Hatter as he contemplates whatever thought has snagged his attention. He has been very quiet and she frets over this. He should not be intimidated into holding his tongue; he certainly hadn’t been when faced with the Red Queen! No, her Hatter should declare his opinions, shout his objections, giggle at his own rhymes, and air his concerns freely, should he have them. And, from the look on his face, he has many.

She is about to ask if he’s all right when a blur of motion catches her eye.

“Aunt Alice!”

She summons up a grin for the twin ten-year-old boys barreling toward her across the lawn. Beside her, the Hatter stiffens. He glances from Alice, to the fair-haired and be-freckled boys, and then back to her again. His eloquent silence and wide-eyed look ask the question more effectively than words could have.

The boys are almost upon them and the Hatter’s hand falters – for the first time – on her waist. He begins to pull back. Alice grips his right hand with hers and holds it in place, answering the wordless query in silence.

“You’re late!” William declares, obediently skidding to a halt when Hamish holds out a hand to stop the boy from dirtying his clothes on Alice’s ruined dress. James, however…

“I was waiting for your stories!” he hollers as Alice stumbles back a step under the force of the child’s momentum. Luckily, the Hatter’s arm across her back assists in steadying her. “Did you go to China again?” James presses, oblivious to the awkward scene around him.

Alice laughs. “No, I went to another place entirely. And I will tell you all about it just as soon as I’ve cleaned up!”

“And will there be pictures?” he presses.

“Absolutely. Now, tree frog, let me go. Aunt Alice has an urgent engagement with a hot bath
before dinner.” Gently, she extracts his arms from around her hips.

James grabs her right hand in his sweaty left to compensate for the separation. “I will escort you!” he announces, and then looks at the Hatter. “Who is he?”

“No one of consequence,” his father replies stuffily.

William gives the Hatter a haughty look, following his father’s example. James, however, is not so easily detoured.

“All actions have consequences,” he informs the assembly. And then pointedly asks the Hatter, “How did you manage to avoid them?”

Alice giggles. “How very smart you are, James,” she replies when the Hatter, who apparently cannot understand James, either, says nothing. “We shall have to investigate that further. But later.”

And, praise be, he subsides.

“The two of you run up to the house and alert Mrs. Martsen that we’ll be requiring two hot baths in separate guest rooms,” Hamish directs. William dutifully complies whereas James feels compelled to give the Hatter a long, considering look before acquiescing.

Hamish scowls after them, irritated by James’ conditional obedience. Before anyone else can interrupt her again, Alice turns to the Hatter, who is watching the twin boys race each other across the wide lawn, and explains, “That was William and James.”

“Which is the tree frog?”

“James,” Alice replies with a grin. “And he’s just like us: wonderfully mad. I don’t doubt he’ll be quite curious about you—”

“You are not to go near him!” Hamish inserts, fatherly concern overcoming whatever objection he might have raised to hearing one of his sons called mad.

Alice resists rolling her eyes. Barely. “Yes, yes. We’ve already established that. Hatter,” Alice continues, turning back to him, “Hamish is understandably wary of your sudden appearance here. These sorts of things don’t tend to happen.”

“How frightfully boring.”

“I agree.” She sighs, sifting through her hazy recollections of her childhood visit (or, perhaps it had been visits?) to Underland. She had rather dropped in on them, hadn’t she? “Well, as Hamish is their father, it’s his right to decide whom his children may and may not be left unsupervised with—”

“Oh, yes, quite within his rights, in that case. I shalln’t intrude where I’m unwelcome.”

In thanks for his generosity and understanding, Alice squeezes the hand still resting on her waist.

After a few more steps and bit of brow-twitching, the Hatter ventures, “Aunt Alice?”

“Oh, well, not really,” she replies. Although mindful of Hamish’s presence, she refuses to withhold a full explanation from the Hatter. He deserves one. “Their mother passed just after they were born, poor dears. At the time, I was an apprenticing with Lord Ascot – Hamish’s late father – at his trading company. I spent quite a good deal of time here when I wasn’t traveling, so
I suppose I am a bit of an honorary aunt.”

“Ah,” the Hatter breathes out, relieved. He quickly deduces, “So, there is a second wife I’ve yet to meet in this family?”

“Er… no, actually.”

The Hatter’s eyes narrow. “That was a picnic for two back in the woods.”

“Er, it was, but—”

The Hatter glares at Hamish and tightens his arm across Alice’s back. She considers brushing him off and scolding him for the male posturing but, were she in his shoes, in a strange land, confronting an Underlandian woman who has designs on him, Alice admits her reaction would likely be very similar. She lets the infraction slide. Just this once.

Hamish manfully ignores the one-upmanship and directs them to the kitchen entrance. Explanations are needful again, this time for the benefit of the rumor-mongering staff. The maids bemoan the state of her dress and Alice blames the lake. She then publicly thanks her silent and orange-haired savior, and makes the introductions.

“But why is Mr. Hightopp wearing that Scottish garb?” one of the less-inhibited maids asks for everyone present.

“Oh, they’re terribly comfortable,” Alice replies. “And quite dashing, really.” And that comment – combined with the hand on her waist – answers all sorts of unspoken questions, Alice is sure. Not that she really minds. Surely, openness will save everyone time and trouble in the long run.

The boys had done their job in passing on their father’s wishes and the guest rooms are nearly ready. Alice accompanies the Hatter to his, whispering as the footman putters about preparing the bath, “How are you? I imagine this all very overwhelming.”

He giggles abruptly. “Rather. Overwhelmed in Upland.”

Alice chuckles. “Are you saying that I must have been underwhelmed in Underland?” It hadn’t felt that way!

The Hatter’s delighted grin fades and an expression of profound sadness passes over his face. Alice does not hesitate to reach out to him. “Everything will be fine. We’ll get cleaned up, have dinner, and then discuss what’s next.”

“What is next?” he inquires a bit desperately.

She says, “Well, I would like you to accompany me to my home, but I shall have to introduce you to my mother and sister before we arrive there. It would be quite a shock if…”

The Hatter’s frown deepens. Alice pauses as he lifts his hands and gently tucks grubby locks of hair behind her ears. “You said… In the Room of Doors, you said…” He pauses, his brows drawing together in sorrow. “You said you’d stay and yet you have a mother and a sister…”

“And I love them very much,” she agrees, “but I wanted…”

The Hatter watches her expectantly. She meets his gaze, studies the depths of his green eyes. Yes, she had wanted him. And now she has him, here, in her world. Perhaps she should not be so quietly thrilled about that. Perhaps she should be thinking about how to get him back to his
“Your bath, sir,” the footman announces. “Madam, if I might escort you to your room?”

“That won’t be necessary, Marshall,” Alice replies, tearing her gaze away from the Hatter. “I know the way.” She turns toward the door, shivering when the Hatter’s warm hands fall away from her. Circumstances permitting, she has not been without his touch since she’d found him asleep, waiting for her beside the little door to the garden in Underland. “I’ll be back shortly. We’ll go down to dinner together,” she promises.

He nods, his throat working in silence. Just before the door closes behind her, Alice glances back and notes his dirty hands, his fingers curled into fists at his side. She gives him a brave smile and a happy wave. As she hurries to her own room and hot bath, she wonders if that reassurance, meager though it had been, will be enough. She has a niggling of an idea of what this experience must be like for him: trapped in a world where he cannot understand the language, where the people believe him to be somewhat frightening, where he feels frightened as he frets over the fate of his world. Indeed, what phenomenon could have occurred to submerge Underland in water? And just how deep is it? What has become of the White Queen? Of Mally and Chessur and Thackery and the Bandersnatch and the Tweedles and Bayard and...!

Oh, it is frightening!

“Here, Miss Alice, step into the water. You’re shivering,” the maid points out and Alice complies, shedding her soiled clothing and stepping into the bath. Her worry for the Hatter turns what is normally a self-indulgence into a chore. When the maid announces her intention to have Alice’s dress laundered downstairs and then departs on that very errand, Alice washes as quickly as she dares, dries herself hurriedly, stumbles into the rather out-of-fashion gown provided by Lady Ascot, and totters down the hall in unlaced shoes.

And it’s a good thing she’d made the effort, too. Her concerns about the Hatter had not been unfounded. She listens to a good deal of crashing and slamming going on inside his room as she clomps up to the obviously shaken footman standing in the hallway.

“What happened?” Alice asks as she draws near.

“I’ve no idea, Miss Alice! One moment he was perfectly civil – if rather incomprehensible – and the next—!”

“I see. Please wait a moment and I shall investigate.” Despite the man’s sputters, Alice knocks softly and then, without waiting for a customary invitation – which she strongly suspects won’t be forthcoming if the Hatter has lost himself in a rage! – she opens the door a smidgeon.

“Hatter?” she calls through the narrow opening. The stomping and swearing in Outlandish cease at once. She enters the room.

And nearly turns right back around and exits it.

The Hatter is standing with his back to the door, his hair washed and somewhat dry. She tells herself to focus on those frizzing strands rather than the rather well-shaped, pale arse in plain view. But... well... one glance surely wouldn’t be too unforgivable, would it?

Perhaps it is, Alice muses, as one glance turns into blatant staring. She steps backward, shutting the door firmly behind her and simply gapes at his nude form. Oh, now she truly does wish that their interlude earlier had occurred following a complete disrobing. His shoulders are not broad but they are strong. His back curves slightly at the base of his spine in such a way that it might...
allow for a rather greedy water droplet to cling there despite a good toweling. His thighs are well-muscled and dusted with auburn hairs that make Alice’s fingertips curious as to their texture.

She clears her throat. “Hatter?”

“Alice,” he sighs. “Th’ bligh’er took mae things.”

She swallows, struggles to remember how to use language properly, and then concludes, “To the laundry.”

“I want them back,” he insists. “They’re all I have. I…” He clears his throat and the dregs of his rage vanish. “I’ll wash them myself.”

“All right. Just a moment.” Alice turns, cracks open the door and relays this request to the footman and the three maids now staring back at her in askance in the hall.

Once she has gotten the footman to repeat the request back to her – “Return his things immediately. Yes, Miss Alice.” – she closes the door soundly, resolutely ignoring the raised brows of the women still gawping openly.

“Marshall will bring them up presently,” she assures him, forcing herself to turn around despite the fact that he is utterly nude and she is well aware of the fact that she should not be looking.

He nods. “Thank ye, Alice.”

She takes a fortifying breath and crosses the room. Cautiously, she places a hand on his shoulder and measures the temperature of his skin. “Here,” she says, reaching for a men’s robe and then holding it out to him. “You’ll catch a chill if you— ahem, yes, well… I would recommend putting those clothes on,” she continues with a nod toward the men’s attire laid out on the bed.

“I’ll not wear anything of that Hamish’s,” he insists stubbornly.

Alice opens her mouth to argue but he when he sends her a rather yellow glance over his shoulder, she stows her argument. “Very well. I’ll ask you to consider wearing something, however. At least until replacements can be located.” She unfolds the robe and holds it aloft with a meaningful shake. “Bear with this robe for a few moments while I sort this out.”

Reluctantly, he complies, cautiously inserting his arms through the sleeves. Once Alice settles the collar in place at the back of his neck, she strides over to the door, opens it, and finds two additional maids in the hall whispering to their cohorts. With a wry expression, Alice deliberately clears her throat and makes yet another request on the Hatter’s behalf. It takes a significant look to get them to scatter, but they do, promising to complete their tasks.

This time, when she closes the door and turns back around, the Hatter is standing just behind it and less than an arm’s length away. He leans toward her, his expression urgent. Alice does not hesitate to wrap her arms around him.

“This is terrifying,” he murmurs into her neck as his longer arms pull her close, “I hope you don’t mind me saying so, Alice. You out-much me in muchness. To think you came to Underland with only—!”

“Hush,” she croons, her heart breaking for him. “Things are frightfully unsure now, I know. But we will find our way. We make the path, you know,” she reminds him as she pets his nearly-dry hair.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he replies with a bit more cheer and enthusiasm. Leaning back, he muses,
“Although, I suppose that Hamish would be rather upset should we make our path right through his estate.”

Alice chuckles. “All the more reason to relocate ourselves as soon as possible.”

A knock on the door concludes the moment and Alice reluctantly steps away. She answers the summons, passing the basket of grubby Underlandish wear to the Hatter and then accepting a pile of carefully folded clean clothing from the maids.

“But—!” is all she hears of the footman’s protest before she kicks the door shut in his face.

“If you’ve no objections, I’ll assist you with your wardrobe,” she offers, moving to lay out the second set of clothing on the bed. The Hatter is already – and very speedily – dealing with his laundry in the bath water still remaining in the tub.

“I am very agreeable to accepting your assistance, Alice.” Grinning, he glances up. Although he gives her his attention, only his left eye is truly focused on her. The misalignment is significant, Alice knows, but she does not know him well enough to deduce precisely what sort of happiness is the cause. “The very thought of refusing you anything I find a most perplexing conundrum.”

She smiles, her heart warming. “In that case, I should like a kiss for my services,” she teases him. “Where is…? Ah, yes! Here it is.” Spying the collection of bits and bobbins from the Hatter’s jacket pockets, she passes over the still-corked bottle of Pishsalver and collects the envelope – curiously, it’s still perfectly white and perfectly dry – and opens it.

But what she reads there is not what she had expected… or perhaps she had. Yes, given the obvious language barrier between Hamish and the Hatter, Alice should have deduced something like this.

She studies the crumbling instruction card, her gaze following each cursive line of the backwards letters. She steps away, toward the men’s vanity, and holds it up to the mirror. And in the mirror’s reflection, she easily reads:

_**Kiss me.**_

She sighs.

“Alice?” She doesn’t stir as the Hatter comes up behind her. “Why are you reading the instructions mirror-wise?” he inquires gently.

“I’m not,” she replies slowly.

For a long moment, there is only silence and the occasional sound of water dripping from recently wrung and hung clothing.

“Ah. I see,” the Hatter replies, reaching for the envelope and trailing his fingertips along the edge. “As I’m from Underland, it is I who is backwards here, not everyone else.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Alice replies, his self-deprecating tone reminding her of a much younger and doubt-filled Almost Alice Kingsleigh. “Of course everyone else is utterly backwards here! Inexcusably so! Why, a corset is considered proper dress! _And_ stockings! Now, I ask you, who in their right mind would voluntarily—!”

The Hatter’s lips waylay the question. He dips toward her and nuzzles quite deliberately at Alice’s mouth. She instantly abandons the tirade and returns his kiss. His mouth is warm and he tastes like the scent of Tulgey Wood and Alice finds herself in his arms with her bare palms.
pressing against his bare chest. He gasps into her mouth as her fingers explore in tiny circles against his skin, pushing the robe open, bit by bit.

“My apologies,” she whispers, coming to her senses suddenly. Eyes averted, she tugs the robe shut once more before it somehow ends up warming his ankles and toes. “I haven’t even assisted you yet, as promised.”

The Hatter grins rakishly. “Mayhap ‘tis th’ custom fer Underlanders teh pay afore th’ services are rendered.”

“In that case, I shall gladly accept the reimbursement and get on with the promised services.”

The Hatter complacently drops his arms, but he – rather deliberately – leans in to press almost-kisses along the side of her neck. She helplessly reaffirms her grip on the robe lapels. Sighing, she rubs her cheek against him, his soft hair tickling her nose.

Alice spares a thought for the unlocked door and the sound of footsteps approaching… and then decides that she doesn’t care. Let the whole house see her in here, in the room and in the arms of an undressed man!

“So sorry, Alice,” the Hatter lisps against her jaw.

“Hm?” she manages through the haze that has wrapped her up in pleasant tingles.

Just then, a very authoritative knock comes at the door. She knows, unquestionably, to whom it belongs and sighs out her disappointment. Hamish will surely have an apoplexy if he sees her in here… but the Hatter does not step away. He lingers, his lips pressed to her skin as Alice clutches him closer and suddenly she knows precisely what he is doing! What he is trying to do! What he has done!

Oh, smart Hatter, Alice praises him even as she shivers under the onslaught of his hot breath. She’s tempted to congratulate him. How wonderfully underhanded he has been, capitalizing on each and every opportunity to demonstrate the fact that his place is at her side and no one will budge him from it! The steadying hand on her waist had been innocuous enough. The subsequent male posturing had been within acceptable boundaries. But now…!

Oh, he had reeled Alice in all right, like a fish on a hook. She had fretted over him all throughout her bath, had charged to his rescue at the first sign of trouble – like a true Champion! – and he had upped the ante. She had walked into his room and stayed despite his nudity, despite the fact that many married couples do not even take such liberties with each other! And all because she alone could resolve his conundrum. Or so he would have all and sundry believe.

A personable fellow like the Hatter could certainly have found a way to communicate with Marshall for the safe return of his things, or he could have indicated with gestures that they were not to be touched. He had done none of that. He had created the very situation that had demanded Alice’s mediation. He had ultimately, without saying a comprehensible word, made both his position and Alice’s Very Clear to All.

Only a truly mad Hatter would devise so delightful an opportunity. He had turned his weaknesses into strengths. Using the very language barrier that had so befuddled him earlier, he had set the scene… and Alice had gladly played her role. When Alice had not shied away from his nudity, she had more or less declared to the entire household, that this strange, wonderful man is hers. Alice’s own actions admit it: she has chosen the Hatter. The point is as simple and profound as that.
The Hatter had given her that opportunity. And what’s more, if she had it all to do over again, with full knowledge this time of his strategy, Alice would not have done a single thing differently. Especially this: the wanton enjoyment of his sensual attentions.

But! Enough is enough.

As painful as it is, Alice forces herself to back away from him. “Stop it, Hatter. Hamish has no claim to me and I believe I’ve already made it abundantly clear that I prefer your company in comparison to all others.” Certainly the sacrifices she had been prepared to make in order to join him in Underland illustrate that!

The Hatter growls mutinously, “Aye… bu’mayhap it isnae clear teh him.”

She considers Hamish’s actions from earlier: he had been concerned on her behalf, frustrated with her reticence, and wary of the Hatter… but he had not – for one moment – been blatantly jealous.

She replies, whispering over the continued knocking at the door, “It will be in time if it isn’t already.” Alice stares him down until his brows twitch with guilt and the knocking on the door has metamorphosed into impatient pounding… which Alice pointedly ignores.

Alice’s lips twist into a wry smile as she regards the Hatter’s bashful demeanor. Not for one moment does she believe the only thing he feels is embarrassment. Oh, she doesn’t doubt there’s a good bucket or two of Victory in there somewhere. She’s actually rather proud of him for holding his own so well under these highly abnormal circumstances.

The summons at the door pauses and the rumble of voices in the hall seems to indicate that Hamish is conferring with the traumatized footman.

“I may not have participated in the past, but I’ve seen this game played many times,” she whispers. And then she decides it’s time to erase that woebegone expression and she frames his face gently in her right-sized hands.

He regards her with his brilliantly green eyes in silence. As she holds him, Alice recalls the moment they had embraced, just inside the door. She remembers his delighted grin at her offer to play the part of valet. She still feels tinges in her belly as she recollects that moment in front of the mirror when the answer to the mystery of the miscommunication had become evident which had led to Alice’s vigorous defense of him and the resulting, impulsive kiss… No, it is not all part of the game, the claim, the possession – thankfully! – but the game must stop here and now. Alice will not tolerate a fiction between the two of them, not when there are so many delightful realities to explore.

“We will get through this together. I am with you.” She thinks of the instruction card in its envelope on the vanity and, smiling, says, “Trust me.”

He grins toothily and with boyish delight. “I do, Alice. I do.”

“Thank you,” she breathes. Knowing she shouldn’t, she leans forward and kisses him. He lets her. Hamish chooses this moment to renew his assault on the door, but – thankfully – the ruckus isn’t loud enough to infringe upon Alice’s enjoyment on the Hatter’s soft groans of appreciation which heat her blood to near-boiling. She would give almost anything to have Hamish simply give up and walk away.

Then again, “Be careful what you wish for” is not a mere collection of random words, is it?

Smiling deviously, Alice breaks the kiss. The Hatter examines her expression for a long moment before playful anticipation begins to sparkle in his eyes. Sensing his expectation, she nods toward
the door and asks, “Shall we let Hamish in so he can have his little episode? Then he may stomp out of the room and leave us in peace?”

The Hatter giggles. “Yes, let’s.”

They do. And Hamish’s flummoxed and flabbergasted reaction to finding Alice in the private chamber of a barely-dressed lunatic is entertaining, indeed. Entertaining but not the least bit heartbroken or even all that shocked. He blusters and objects mightily before retreating just as Alice had predicted he would.

As she gently combs the Hatter’s wild hair with her fingers, Alice glances at the door, considers Lord Ascot’s chronic need to propose and, for the first time, wonders at it.
Dinner is a torment. A horrid, dreadful, miserable torment. Especially as Alice spends most of it alternately scrutinizing Hamish and directing toothy, insincere grins at Lady Ascot. But, mostly, Alice endures dinner as she wonders how to salvage the hopeful, playful mood of less than an hour ago. Upstairs, in his room, as Alice had tied his cravat for him, the Hatter had looked confident. Happy, even. Ready for anything.

“I have an idea,” she had confided in him, averting her gaze as he’d handed the robe back to her.

“A crazy, mad, wonderful idea?” he’d wanted to know.

“I believe so. I would tell you what it is, except I think it would be better if you were surprised.”

“Then surprise me, my Alice. I trust ye…”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Alice,” one of the footmen gently interrupts, shattering the memory. He steps forward and offers her the contents of an ornate tray with aplomb. “This just arrived for you.”

Alice stares at the envelope with her name clearly written on the front in very familiar handwriting.

“I took the liberty of sending word to your mother and sister, Alice. Informing them of your extended stay here,” Lady Ascot announces in between sips of potage.

“Did you? How thoughtful,” Alice manages in a strained tone. She takes the letter and nods to the footman. It would be impolite to read it at the table, but she will deal with this just as soon as she is able.

The lady of the house smiles thinly. “I’m sure you would have thought to do the same under normal circumstances.”

*I suppose now we’ll never know,* Alice returns in silent irritation.

“And I may have mentioned your… unusual acquaintance. You met by the lake, was it?”

“Hm,” Alice replies vaguely, too busy imagining what sorts of horrors Lady Ascot might have described in that note. Alice and Hamish’s mother have never been on the best of terms, not since Alice had turned down Hamish’s first and most public proposal, encouraged Lord Ascot’s visions of grandeur, and been caught trying to secretly train the dogs not to dismember the poor garden rabbits that the woman so loathes. (That had been a very busy year for Alice.) Nor does the woman particularly care for the fact that her grandsons – especially James – are rather more fond of Alice than they are of their own grandmother. Still, that’s hardly Alice’s fault! In fact, the boys ought to be commended for their excellent common sense!

“I thought so,” the woman muses in a tone empty of both sincerity and genuine interest. Alice experiences a moment where she is viscerally aware of Lord Ascot’s absence. Her former employer had always managed to curb his wife’s bitterness and viciousness. He had refined the art of placating her and gently teasing her until she would even smile at her own audacity.

Alice regards the woman who might have been her mother-in-law. *You miss him, too,* Alice doesn’t say, doesn’t have the heart to say what with the Hatter sitting beside her dressed in one of the late Lord Ascot’s suit trappings. These are the clothes that Alice had requested from the
twittering maids that had been gossiping uselessly in the hall earlier. Alice had even managed to convince the Hatter to wear them with a minimum of fuss.

“To whom do these belong?” he had asked warily after Alice had managed to banish Hamish from the room with a very well-made threat to help the Hatter clothe himself with Hamish looking on. That had been enough to cause Lord Ascot to beat a hasty retreat, muttering darkly and slamming the door behind him.

“They belonged to the former Lord Ascot…”

The Hatter had studied her expression for a moment before deducing, “Whom you cared for very deeply. Thank you, Alice. I should be honored to wear them and obliged to look after them.”

Seeing her beloved benefactor’s clothes on the man she loves, Alice can’t help but think of unbearable things: what would she do if, one day, the Hatter were gone? Her heart throbs with emotion. She damn’s herself again for not going looking for that rabbit hole sooner. Oh, all the time she has wasted! But, no. Stop it, Alice!

She takes a deep, calming breath as discreetly as possible. She will go wherever he goes. Her decision, hastily made earlier in the day, has not changed. Here or in Underland, they will be together. And she will not think about such horrid what-ifs. She will focus on the here and now.

She has been staring at him too long. Alice realizes this when he turns to her and genteelly passes the dish of curried carrots which had already been well within her range. She does not say thank you. She smiles instead. He grins softly in reply and for a single, marvelous moment, it is just the two of them there, at dinner together.

When he turns back to his meal, Alice selfishly indulges in the pleasure of simply watching him for a few moments more. The Hatter reaches for a spoon, taking care to nudge the cuff of his borrowed shirt out of the way with a flamboyant flip of his wrist before collecting the utensil dexterously with his left hand. Alice does not remember the Hatter favoring his left hand in Underland… but then, perhaps this is yet more evidence that he has been forced into a realm that mirrors his own. His written words inevitably come out reversed. (They had investigated this as they’d been waiting for dinner to be announced.) Alice is unsure why she can clearly understand his speech but not read his handwriting. Perhaps because she had not taken proper lessons as the Mock Turtle had recommended? If her foggy recollections are true, then she had merely listened to the creature’s history. Perhaps that had been enough “learning” for her to understand the Hatter even here, in Upland, but not enough to translate mirror-wise-written words?

She aches to pose this question to him, to ask for his advice or his thoughts on the matter. But, Alice has a job to do that will hopefully alter his tentative welcome in this house for the better.

“Alice!”

She startles, banging her soup spoon against the porcelain. The resulting chime echoes in the candlelit room. Lady Ascot winces expressively, William snorts, and James – the little urchin – giggles down at the contents of his bowl.

“Yes, Hamish?” Alice manages, returning Lord Ascot’s flat stare with a mild look.

He sniffs with fascinating eloquence. “Contemplating what it would be like to fly, were we?” he muses.

Alice narrows her eyes. The phrase would have been a running joke between them if the original utterance hadn’t been so utterly marred by Hamish’s public humiliation. Alice had apologized for
that, had even thanked him for thinking of her, for caring whether or not the daughter of his father’s business associate needed to be properly taken care of…

“However gentlemanly the offer was made, Hamish, you need to know one thing: I do not require looking after.”

He had seemed to believe her. And then he had met and married Laurel Whitcombe. Alice – then midway through her apprenticeship overseas – had been genuinely happy for him. Hamish has always been a good man, just not the right one for her. But then, after his wife had passed from a fever, Hamish had proposed again… and again and again.

Now tired of the endless pressure Hamish forces her to bear as she continuously deflects his honor-inspired, gentlemanly concerns, exhausted from upholding her dignity in the face of his unimagination and pigheadedness, Alice returns his flat stare and, emotionlessly, replies, “No, perhaps you don’t recall the balloon flight I took the year before last? The issue of flying has been settled to my satisfaction for some time now.”

She clears her throat and glances at the Hatter. She can see the enthusiastic questions in his eyes – Had she really flown? What had that been like? – but she knows he will not ask them. He is waiting for her to fulfill her promise; he is trusting her to do so… and this is the perfect opportunity to address an increasingly-popular misunderstanding. Without further ado, she takes it:

“I was actually wondering what it would be like to speak backwards, mirror-wise, as it were.”

“Mirror-wise?” James repeats, intrigued.

Alice gives him a smile and elaborates before either Lady Ascot or Hamish can scold him for speaking without first being spoken to. “Yes. Imagine a card – say, a tea party invitation – held up to a mirror. Now, you or I would have quite a bit of trouble reading the reflection, wouldn’t we? Especially if we had not examined the words on the card beforehand or known the details of the party. Do you agree James? William?”

Both boys consider the issue carefully before nodding. While William’s gesture is cautious, James’ is blatantly enthusiastic, eager for the rest of the riddle.

“How,” Alice continues, “imagine that the mirror does not reflect images and writing, but sounds and voices.”

“What nonsense,” Lady Ascot waspishly proclaims. “Why-ever would we care to think on such an improbable phenomenon?”

Gathering her patience one evaporating ounce at a time, Alice explains, “Because, Lady Ascot, the occurrence may not be as improbable as it seems.” She turns to Hamish’s sons and asks, “Here is a challenge for you: what would my name sound like, if it were spoken mirror-wise?”

William scowls and mutters quietly to himself as he works the problem out discretely. James, on the other hand, spells out something on the tablecloth with his bare finger – presumably, Alice’s name – stares at it for a moment, and then with a grin of triumph, announces: “Ecila!”

Beside her, the Hatter startles. He glances at James and then turns toward Alice, a delighted grin splitting his face and showing off his gap-toothed front teeth. His fingers spasm restlessly, as if they ache to cross the tablecloth to keep company with hers.

Alice reaches for his hand and grasps it openly. She nods to James and then asks William, “Do you concur?” The boy may not have his brother’s unconventional imagination or uninhibited
curiosity, but that’s no reason to overlook his contribution to the discussion!

“Ecila…” William agrees with reluctance, causing the Hatter to giggle.

“And now,” Alice continues, turning to the Hatter, “if you would please say my given name, sir?”

Practically glowing with joy, he does. The Hatter declares, “Alice!”

And although Alice had heard own name properly spoken in his voice, the sudden silence surrounding the table communicates Lord Ascot and his mother’s shock quite well.

“I’ll be…!” Hamish murmurs as his sons congratulate each other. The dawning understanding pulls his expression into the manifestation of pointless disbelief and grudging amazement.

“Preposterous,” Lady Ascot marvels, attempting to look unimpressed.

Before Alice can offer them a bit of crow for dinner – See! He isn’t a lunatic after all! – James opines, “Fantastic! Aunt Alice, you understand mirror-wise English! You must teach me how to speak it, too!”

“Absolutely not,” Hamish utters woodenly, more out of habit than any real objection. “Useless waste of time.” Luckily, he’s too busy studying – reevaluating, perhaps? – the Hatter to notice the conspiratorial wink Alice sends in the boy’s direction.

“What would cause such an affliction, do you think?” the current Lord Ascot muses, mostly to himself.

Alice pretends to contemplate her soup as she says off-handedly, “The events of this afternoon were quite unsettling. Perhaps you struck your head and befuddled your brain?” This suggestion she directs to the Hatter, who happily plays along.

“Yes, yes! I cannot recall a bump to the head, but then again they are quite elusive things to capture in one’s own memory, are they not?”

“That does not explain why you appear to be able to communicate with him,” Hamish points out rather too rationally.

It is fortunate, then, that Alice has quite a bit of practice in discounting logical rationale. She responds, “Perhaps I suffered a similar but lesser injury. Or perhaps my… uniqueness is making itself useful.”

Lady Ascot smirks. “We always knew you were not quite right in the head, dear.”

“Naturally,” Alice agrees, allowing the remark to flow off of her like beads of water off of a mink stole. “A head has both a left half and a right. I should hope I’m well balanced. ‘Not quite right’ sounds rather healthy to me so long as I am also ‘not quite left’!”

James guffaws and even William smiles. Before Lady Ascot can launch another verbal cannon ball, Alice turns back to Hamish and asks in as reasonable a tone as possible, “Is it not within the realm of possibility that simply because something or someone does not appear to make sense, it does not necessarily follow that he makes no sense at all?”

Hamish glances from Alice to the Hatter and seems to ponder these words.

It is not a victory, Alice knows. But her years of experience in business negotiations tell her one very certain thing: it is not a victory… yet.
Alice had hated the thought of giving up, of leaving her point unpressed at dinner, especially when victory still had not been declared, but she knows Hamish. And she knows how he balks when faced with his own errors in judgment… knows how the man has the rather bothersome tendency of cutting off his own nose to spite his face.

So she had blatantly changed the topic by asking what Hamish had meant to say which she’d interrupted with riddles and other nonsense.

“I was merely attempting to confirm,” the man had said, eying the Hatter appraisingly, “if you and your guest – Hightopp, was it? – will be staying the night.”

Even now – hours after the fact – Alice is thrilled by those three words in Hamish’s voice: “Hightopp, was it?”

It is the first time Hamish had bothered to care one whit about the man’s proper name, which she had told everyone at the beginning of dinner, performing the introductions on the Hatter’s behalf. True, Hamish might have simply used the Hatter’s name for propriety’s sake, but he had used it. Could it be possible that Hamish does not believe the Hatter is a lunatic any longer?

She tilts her head back against the pillow and smiles up at the ceiling in the dark. If she can convince Hamish that the Hatter is merely an eccentric or a victim of some vaguely-explainable condition, then surely she can manage introducing him to her mother and sister! Surely there is a way!

Alice sighs out her happiness until her thoughts are calm again. But as they calm, they sadden. The Hatter is down the hall in his room and she would much rather be there. And, really, why shouldn’t she be there? He is her Hatter, after all! And she is a grown woman! As long as the boys don’t see her sneaking through the halls at night…

She shouldn’t do it. Perhaps that’s why she does. Sensing that sleep will not answer her call tonight – perhaps she and it no longer speak the same language, or perhaps she requires the Hatter’s assistance with a translation – Alice slides out of bed, puts on the robe and slippers provided for her, and silently exits her room.

It is nearly pitch black in the hall, but she knows the layout well. And she knows precisely how many steps it is to the Hatter’s door. What she does not count on, upon reaching it, is the startling swiftness with which it opens before she can even knock. She gasps reflexively and warm hands fumble for her shoulders in the dark. And then she hears him giggle softly.

Relieved, she moves toward him and quietly shuts the door behind her.

“Hatter,” she whispers as she smooths her cheek against his slightly stubbled one.

“Yes, Alice?”

“May I stay the night?”

His arms pull her closer. His teeth worry at her earlobe. “I’ve a bed nauw,” he murmurs. “Hauw wou’ye like teh use it?”

“Thoroughly.”

This time, when they come together, there are no clothes or other fabrications between them. Alice gasps softly against his bare shoulder, counts the irregularities along the skin of his chest
with her fingertips. Several slash-like lines of raised skin here just below his heart, a pucker of once-burnt flesh there near his collarbone… to name a few. She had not noticed them earlier as she had not given herself permission to explore his form thoroughly and she had steadfastly refused to allow herself – despite her burning curiosity – to survey more than the view he'd presented to her when she had entered the room initially, but now… Now she understands why, on the drive of Marmoreal, clearly thrilled to have escaped Crims with his life, the Hatter had not embraced her although, at the time, she had expected he would. She does not ask why he had merely clasped her hands briefly then. She does not ask what these marks are, nor why they are on his chest rather than on his back; she already knows.

“Do you forgive me?” she murmurs. “I was late. So very late. I did such a poor job of saving you…”

“She does. And later, he holds her close until she falls asleep in his arms. The next morning there is no shout of outrage when the maid discovers Alice’s bed still empty. The gossip had made the rounds and the bets had been placed. The smirking and now-seven-shillings-richer maid merely knocks softly upon the Hatter’s door and, when there is no reply, slides the basket containing Alice’s just-laundered clothes into the room and shuts the door behind her.

Sometime later, when Alice opens her eyes, the Hatter is already dressed in his Underlandish clothing and eagerly waiting to assist her with her dress. She has never woken up to someone sitting on the edge of her bed, watching her sleep, and she does not know if it will become a regular occurrence, but if it does she rather thinks she could get used to it. She smiles blearily up at him and reaches for his hands. The embrace is warm and silent and wonderful. Alice sighs, knowing she had better get up before the rest of the house wakes. She has no desire to meet Hamish as she exits the Hatter’s room so early in the morning. She is a guest in his home, after all.

She washes up and the Hatter assists her with gentleness and speed into her clothing. Alice breathes a sigh of relief to be out of Lady Ascot’s old dress once and for all.

When the Hatter chews on a yawn, Alice feels a twinge of guilt; he’d been waiting for her to wake up before enjoying his morning cuppa.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your assistance this morning – because I do! – but you could have gone downstairs for tea without me,” Alice whispers, mindful of the silence of early morning that permeates the manor. She takes the Hatter’s offered arm as he closes the bedroom door softly behind them. “I would have found you.”

“Perhaps,” he agrees, placing his hand over hers. “But I would have been rather lost in the meantime.”

Alice guides the Hatter through the Ascot family home to the breakfast room. Due to the early hour, it is still unoccupied. The Hatter assists Alice with her seat, takes the tea tray from the butler and shoos the man away.

Smiling, Alice watches the Hatter prepare their teas: cream first, then sugar, and finally the tea itself. “You’ll want to stir that clockwise, Alice,” he suggests softly although his own motions are the exact opposite.

She finds it very interesting that there are many things that the Hatter performs in reverse with ease – the fixing of tea and mirror-wise writing (that is, from right to left), to name a few. While she cherishes these eccentricities, they also remind her – in screaming silence – of the fact that this is
not the Hatter’s world.

But… could it be? Would he even consider staying? Even if Underland is not completely lost to them? Perhaps it has moved. Or perhaps someone had placed a lake in the garden that leads to the room of doors… They might still return, if not via the rabbit hole, then another way, perhaps.

Considering that, Alice says softly, mindful of people who are surely minding her business rather than their own, “Hatter, in looking for your hat today, we’ll undoubtedly encounter the rabbit hole again…”

“It’s not likely to be a close encounter,” he muses, sniffing a dullish-looking biscuit with suspicion. “We already inspected that area and deemed it hat-less.”

“We did,” she allows, passing him the Battenberg which he accepts with a happy noise. “But… would you prefer it if it were a close encounter… following the retrieval of your hat?”

The Hatter pauses, his fork hovering over the slice of cake. “Alice… are you suggesting…?”

“Would you prefer to return today? If we’re given the chance?”

He narrows his eyes in response to some unhappy thought or other. After a moment, he points out gently, “Your mother and sister are expecting us today, are they not?”

She nods. “I sent a note after dinner last night introducing you briefly to them. And a good thing I did, too. Lady Ascot has a true gift for portraying circumstances at their most… dire. I’m sure Mother and Margaret would have made the journey here, in the middle of the night, if I hadn’t replied.” Alice shakes her head at the thought of her family’s well-meaning interference. She is a grown woman. Truly, the ways of her homeland are perfectly blind when it comes to the capability of a woman to live her own life.

“Are you… concerned,” the Hatter inquires delicately, “that your kin will also react adversely to making my acquaintance?”

“He? Oh!” Alice exclaims, realizing how that explanation must have sounded. Oh, how she would like to reassure him, but to do so would be to commit a grave injustice. She will not coddle him, not when he most assuredly does not need it. He has never been anything other than unfailingly honest with her. It would be a mistake for her to behave otherwise now that it is he who is the guest in a strange world. “Well… I’m not saying that it’ll be easy, but if I can convince Hamish, the unimaginative business man and self-made skeptic, to give you chance…!”

“Hm, yes. I rather thought Lord Ascot looked a bit… illuminated at dinner,” the Hatter observes, his brows wiggling with humor. “Thank ye f’r tha’, laddie.”

Alice returns his soft smile. “It was my pleasure.” And then, replaying his comment, she asks, “So, he’s _Lord Ascot_ now is he? Whatever happened to _that Hamish_?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not entirely sure,” the Hatter answers, and then leans forward to confide, “Do you suppose he’s still there?”

Alice smiles. “It’s possible. But if he wishes to be civil, I advise you to let him.”

“Very uninteresting – civil behavior,” he opines with a wrinkle of his nose. He then glances at the bread and butter and his wild brows adopt a hopeful tilt.

Alice passes him the dishes without being asked. “You’re welcome,” she says.
“Thank you, Alice,” he replies on a giggle. Indicating the plates by his elbow, he points out, “Although I appreciate you making the effort to adopt Underlandian table manners for my sake…”

“I didn’t pass them properly, I know. I’m afraid it isn’t the custom here to expedite such things.” Alice can only imagine what Lady Ascot would think upon hearing that Alice and the Hatter had been tossing food at each other over the breakfast table.

The Hatter shakes his head in woeful disappointment. “How is it you managed to develop such sound logic in the face of such utter backward-ness, Alice?”

She smiles and sips her tea. After a moment, she gently reminds him, “So, if the rabbit hole is agreeable to permitting us passage today…”

Setting down his empty teacup and reaching for the cream again, the Hatter says in a gently chiding tone, “It’s very rude to break an appointment.”

Alice isn’t sure what to feel in response to that. It’s not that she minds the reprimand, although there is something odd about the Hatter lecturing her on rudeness, she acknowledges. Perhaps she is edgy and anxious at the thought of remaining in Upland because she had not prepared for that eventuality. And besides, there’s the mystery of a very wet Underland to solve… Still, the Hatter is aware of the situation. Alice had given him the choice and he seems to have made it.

“Well,” she remarks, buttering her bread from the bottom up, as the Hatter had done, “if it’s an issue of manners, then I suppose we’d better be late as well.”

“That, my Alice,” he returns with a rather knowing, gap-toothed grin, “I would be happy to assist you with.”

And he does. Following breakfast, Alice and the Hatter make their way across the lawn. They had not encountered either Hamish or Lady Ascot at breakfast and so Alice had left word with the butler regarding their whereabouts. The moment they are within the shadowy protection of the forest, the Hatter whispers her name, tugs on her hand, and Alice steps into his arms.

Their mouths meet hungrily despite the fact that they had just breakfasted. Alice moans softly at the taste of him: buttery and sweet. His fingers splay and his palms press against her lower back, urging her closer.

“Again I’ve nae bed, Alice,” he mumbles as he investigates the space behind her ear with the tip of his nose.

“A truly frustrating conundrum,” she agrees, aching to feel him moving with her and within her again. She leans toward him, presses her lips to his white throat and he shivers. She briefly contemplates finding a patch of grass to accommodate them, but then she remembers that they only have this one change of clothes. Bugger and blast. While Alice might not mind the Hatter greening her skirt, she’s fairly sure that the introductions later today will not go well at all if it’s clear what she and the Hatter have gotten up to.

As the Hatter nuzzles under her chin and nips at the buttons on her blouse, Alice damn the very life she has worked so hard to build: she and the Hatter will never be able to resume their intimate activities if they stay with Alice’s mother and sister. There’s really only one solution to be had…

Alice’s hand slides from the Hatter’s hip to the front of his kilt. He jerks impulsively against her, and she feels his hardness briefly against her palm. Oh, how she wants…

The Hatter steps away, brushing gentle kisses along her cheek, her jaw, her chin. “Alice,” he
warns her gently.

“I know,” she sighs. As delightful as this is, now is not the time, here is not the place, these are not the garments, and there is still a hat to be found. “But we will begin this later, sir.”

He gives her a wide grin. “I look forward to it, my Alice,” he growls softly, his rough fingertips trailing gently down the side of her neck before encountering the lace that blocks further exploration.

As the more intimate expeditions will have to wait, Alice suggests taking the road less traveled. They spend the morning attempting to lose themselves in the forest. The Hatter provides excellent rationale for this:

“A lost hat must be somewhere, but as we do not know where that somewhere is, then it must be elsewhere, and everyone knows the only way to find an Elsewhere is to lose yourself Somewhere.”

It sounds like utter nonsense and Alice adores him for it. After searching the trails, trees, and brush for nearly an hour, Alice suggests, “Perhaps it followed our trail back to the rabbit hole?”

As the Hatter has no other suggestions, they meander their way back to the spot where Hamish had found them the day before.

Alice hears it before she sees it: the sound of bubbling. Rounding the bend in the trail, she and the Hatter are confronted with something that is rather larger than a rabbit hole at the base of a gnarled tree. They stare at the muddy pool that has replaced the hole. It occasionally bubbles and froths and the rhythm, though seemingly random, reminds Alice of a beating heart. But, returning to the task at hand, she notes with disappointment that there is no hat nearby. Not huddled under a bush or dangling from a branch overhead.

“I’m so sorry, Hatter,” she says, placing her hand on the small of his back.

“I’m not,” he answers. His expression is solemn as he wraps an arm around her and nuzzles her hair. “My hat or my Alice. I made mae choice an’ I d’nae r’gret it.” Alice returns his embrace in silence.

For not just one or two, but many moments all strung together like berries on a string of Christmas garland, Alice holds onto the Hatter – her Hatter – and he holds her back. This is all he has now – in this world, anyway – she realizes: the clothes on his back, the trinkets in his pockets, and her. She vows to be a keepsake of equal – if not surpassing – worth.

“Oi! Aunt Alice! Halloooo!”

Alice looks up from where her cheek had come to rest upon the Hatter’s shoulder and glances back the way they’d come, toward the house.

The Hatter muses, “Is that…?”

“James,” Alice confirms wryly. “It must be after breakfast.” Normally, the boys’ lessons would be starting now, but she can imagine Hamish relenting just this once so that they can have their stories from Aunt Alice before she departs for her own home. “Hamish must have agreed to a bit of storytime before they start their lessons for the day.”

“Ah, yes,” the Hatter recalls. “You did promise the wee lasses you’d give them a picture show.”

“I did.” And as that appointment had been postponed until after dinner following the dramatic
episode that the Hatter had orchestrated, and then rescheduled completely due to the necessity of replying to the urgent note from Helen Kingsleigh, Alice has to admit that the boys have been more than patient with her.

“A question, Hatter,” Alice begins as they lazily move along the path toward the sounds of two boys on a storyteller hunt.

“Yes?”

“Not that one,” she teases him and he giggles. Taking his hand in hers, she asks, “Why call me a lad and William and James lasses?”

He blinks at her with such befuddlement that Alice laughs out loud. “I can see that this is another point of contention between Upland and Under,” she mutters around her giggles. “How delightful.”

“Quite frankly, Alice,” the Hatter finally says, “everyone knows ‘tis th’ lads tha’ gae off teh battle. An’ ‘tis th’ lasses tha’ follow.”

Alice sobers at that, remembering the Battle of Frabjous Day. “It’s the same here, more or less. Perhaps Upland and Under are not all that different after all…”

“Aunt Alice!” The call precedes the sound of pounding footsteps.

“We’ve been found,” Alice alerts the Hatter unnecessarily.

“Hardly!” he disagrees. “You have been found. I might still make my escape.”

She doesn’t let go of his hand and he doesn’t resist her grip. For a crazy moment, she remembers their flight from the Red Knights and imagines herself as right-sized and the Hatter as a small, Pishsalvered man tucked in her pocket. “What sort of hat would I have tossed you to safety on?” she muses as they maintain their unhurried pace.

The Hatter grins. She can tell by the wild tilt of his brows that not only had he understood her non sequitur, but he already has something very specific in mind. The answer to her riddle is there, she sees, inside his mind and its existence calls forth the ghost of an idea…

And then James bursts into view on the trail. He races up to them and then windmills to a halt in their path. Panting, he braces his hands on his knees and wheezes, “You’re—late—again!”

“I know!” Alice despairs, ruffling his hair. “It’s a terrible affliction. Luckily, it’s only contagious through hand-to-hand contact.”

“Oh…” the boy manages between breaths. And then seeing that Alice is holding the Hatter’s hand quite firmly, he laughs. “You are doomed, sir.”

Alice does not have to repeat this for the Hatter’s benefit. Noting James’ pointed look and quirky grin, the Hatter giggles happily and swings Alice’s hand between them, not at all disturbed by his fate.

And then another voice echoes through the forest. “Ooooi! Jamie!”

“Down the trail!” he calls back to William.

“Shall we meet him in the middle?” Alice asks, offering her other arm to James.
As they meander along, James dares to peep at the Hatter around Alice’s now-laundered skirt. The Hatter peeps back.

“You really talk mirror-wise?” the boy asks, clearly remembering the discussion from dinner the night before.

“He sounds mirror-wise to you, but you sound mirror-wise to him,” Alice explains.

James is thrilled by the revelation. “So… I can already speak mirror-wise… and I didn’t even know it?”

He does a little skip-hop dance, jostling Alice.

William catches up to them – or perhaps it is they who catch up to William – shortly and James explains their natural abilities at speaking mirror-wise. William doesn’t look nearly as impressed as James and, with a calculating gleam in his eye, dares to test the theory.

“Is it true you hear my words in reverse?” he dares the Hatter. In response, the Hatter tilts his head to the side in the universal gesture for confusion.

The boy grins, “So if I said you looked like a girl in that skirt and your hair is worse than Mrs. Martsen’s old brooms and those stockings make you look like a tinker—”

Alice interrupts him drolly, “I think you’ve made your point, William.” The Hatter is utterly undisturbed by the child’s observations. Although, in all honesty, Alice isn’t sure he would be offended even if he had understood the teasing.

_I must remedy that._ Yes, if the Hatter wishes to stay in Upland for a significant length of time – and he may have to if they don’t find another rabbit hole to accommodate them! – then he should be able to understand the speech here. Alice will not tolerate him being taken advantage of or mocked. Alice considers what sort of approach to this might be the best weapon with which to arm him in order to avoid those scenarios.

“You shut your mouth about his stockings!” James eagerly defends the Hatter. “They are the best stockings in the whole world!”

Alice disregards the brotherly squabbling. After all, it’s probably best for them to get it all out of their systems before they all sit down together for Alice’s stories. She is not quite sure she has the mental acumen to deal with a rambunctious audience today. Not with so many other potential obstacles on the pre-dusk horizon.

Despite her reassurances to the contrary, Alice is concerned about how her mother and sister will react. Hopefully, the “marvelous eccentricities” Alice had mentioned in her note will cause her family to imagine something far more… colorful than is actually the case. Although… considering the Hatter’s preferences in fashion, that may not be a realistic expectation. Still, they will get through this together! She had promised him they would and, one way or another, they will.

The boys suddenly forget their argument when a squirrel darts across the path ahead and then both Alice and the Hatter are forgotten as they tear off after it for a better look.

“Alice…” the Hatter begins slowly.

“Yes?”

“Would I be correct – or nearly – in assuming that you like children?”
Considering the intimate nature of their relationship, Alice takes a moment to construct her answer. “I enjoy spending the occasional afternoon with William and James. I realize that having a child of one’s own may be a vastly different experience, but it is one that I am not opposed to.”

She glances up to gauge the Hatter’s reaction to this. In her hands, his fingers twitch. He smiles brightly and then glances toward her belly. “I… It… Don’t you think… Well, might it be odd for…”

Alice waits for him to get all his thoughts in the correct order.

“You continue to call me Hatter,” he finally says, his brows twitching with worry.

She caresses his captured fingers with her thumb. “Would you prefer that I use your given name?”

“I… no, I don’t think so, but how would I ever explain why… and that’s assuming I could explain it! But… should there be a child, Alice…”

She blinks, startled by the implications of his inarticulately phrased concerns. Yes, if there is a child, would he or she understand the Hatter’s speech as Alice does? Or would the child be like any other born in Upland? At the present time, and under the present circumstances, there is no way to know for sure.

With the lush greenery of the lawn in view just up ahead, Alice pauses and lifts her hands to Tarrant’s face. “Should there be a child,” she whispers, staring into his wide eyes, “our child,” she further clarifies, “I would be overcome with joy. The rest,” she promises yet again as a tremulous smile begins to form on his dark lips, “will sort itself out in time.” Either the Hatter will learn Uplandish Speech or the child will learn both. Really, it doesn’t matter. The real mystery is how it is possible for Alice to both comprehend it so effortlessly and make herself understood to him using plain English. She wonders, idly, if she might be dreaming all of this.

“Pinch me,” she whispers as he leans toward her, their mouths brushing.

“Why would I do that, Alice?”

“To prove I’m not dreaming.”

He giggles against her lips. “You still believe this is a dream, do you?”

“If it is, it is the best dream I’ve ever had.”

She grasps his shoulders and his palms cradle her face as their mouths meet in earnest. Her blood heats and dances within her and those shivery, shimmery feelings are back. Her fingers itch to undo his shirt buttons and her thighs ache to wrap around his hips and…

“All this time, I’ve been in love and I didn’t even know it,” she confesses with her eyes still closed and his taste on her tongue. “Absolem really would call me a stupid girl for that… and I would most definitely deserve it.”

The Hatter’s only reply is a kiss for her honesty. She does not need to hear him say the words, they exist here and now, as plain as day; he may be concerned about his hat and the fate of Underland, but he is here – with her – first and foremost. Any words he could say to express what that signifies would be purely superfluous.

“Where’s Aunt Alice?”
“Lost again, I bet.”

She and the Hatter giggle quietly at their escorts’ exasperated tones.

“Come along, Alice,” he whispers warmly in her ear. “I do believe we are just late enough for your appointment.”

*~*~*~*

Their arrival at the house – preceded by much fanfare thanks to William and James – is met with cautious civility from Hamish. Lady Ascot is nowhere to be seen, which is just as well. If she’d insisted on joining her grandsons in hearing the tales of Alice’s more recent travels, she would have undoubtedly ruined the entire affair.

Despite that, Alice knows she wouldn’t be able to hold it against the woman. She can only imagine what it must be like to suddenly find oneself all alone after years of companionship with someone who knows you through and through, who sees your faults and chooses to remain by your side despite them.

_Don’t leave me_, she wishes she could say to the Hatter. Perhaps one day she will. Perhaps one day, he will promise to stay.

“Time at last to hear what madness you encountered abroad, is it?” Hamish declares and Alice summons up a victorious grin.

“Utter madness, I assure you!” she gamely replies and then turns toward the Hatter to ask if he would like to join them.

He anticipates her, however, and looks directly at Hamish. With a brief bow and a quirk of his wild brows, he opens the silent conversation. His green gaze darts toward Alice before returning to Hamish again and permission to join the presentation is requested without a word. For a moment, Lord Ascot seems quite taken aback by the Hatter’s expressive patience. And then, with an equally silent (though abrupt) nod, Hamish agrees.

Moments later, Alice finds herself seated in the parlor with her audience of four males as she shows them the sketches she had done of Nagasaki, Japan and its people.

“Those are swords?” William asks at one point, indicating the accessories of the samurai.

“Why do the men wear their hair like that?” James wants to know. And then, after Alice has addressed their questions, she holds up the next illustration.

“Is that a Bandersnatch?” James asks and Alice grins. Yes, she had told Hamish’s boys about Underland, although she had insisted it was fiction, a tale she had been told during her travels. Lord only knows what sort of fit Hamish would have thrown if she’d dared to imply otherwise.

“Hatter,” Alice says, turning to her lover. “James would like to know if this fellow here—” She indicates the sketch of a dancer wearing a rather hairy dragon costume. “—could be a Bandersnatch.”

The Hatter giggles and gives James a chummy look. “To tell you the truth, the very same thought crossed my mind. Do you suppose it left any footprints?”

Alice translates this and the boys giggle as they study the carpet with the Hatter, looking for any signs of passing thoughts.
“Did you see an idea just now, Hamish?” Alice asks and nearly chokes on her shock when the man glances from his sons to the Hatter and then pointedly leans over the threshold of the room and glances both ways along the hall before saying, “He’s long gone, I’m afraid.”

Marveling at Hamish’s participation in their nonsense, Alice conveys her regrets, thereby skillfully relaying the message to the Hatter.

James asks William what a thought looks like and as his brother describes something that rather makes Alice think of a blue octopus with hair the Hatter leans forward, gently drawing her attention. “You ventured to this place – Japan – on a ship, across an ocean, Alice?” the Hatter interjects in an awed whisper.

“Yes,” she replies, wishing she could reach out to him – he looks a bit flabbergasted and in need of a reassuring pat – unfortunately, Hamish is still supervising the entire event. Raising her voice to include the man, she muses, “Although I am considering air travel next. What do you think, Hamish?” she asks. “Is there a future in it?”

He gives Alice a long look and she stares back, hoping…

No, she is not only referring to air travel. She is also referring to the Hatter. Might Hamish be capable of tolerating – even welcoming – the man, accepting him as the one Alice has chosen? After a long moment, the Hatter follows Alice’s gaze and turns. She watches as both men study each other in silence.

“Perhaps…” Hamish finally allows stiffly, “it is not inconceivable.”

Alice grins and subtly translates for the Hatter: “Not inconceivable. Thank you, Hamish. We shall remain optimistic, then.” For not only air travel but also for other things.

“Show us the next one!” William insists with uncustomary bluntness.

“Did you draw any pictures of swordfights?” James asks, his body humming with excitement at the thought.

Grinning, Alice continues her presentation and, when that is through and her sketches and trinkets inspected to the point of exhaustion, James presses for the Hatter to speak a bit more mirror-wise English and – interestingly enough – Hamish permits them to make a game of it: Alice gives the boys word to reverse, or – in some cases a line from a rhyme – and then the Hatter presents it. Once the boys have unpuzzled “London” and “God save the queen” (among others), the Hatter presents them with a challenge of his own. After quite a bit of laughter and giggling, the Hatter leads the boys through the reversed, first verse of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat.” Alice watches his nimble fingers direct the tune and she suddenly wonders what had become of his thimbles; he had not been wearing them in the Room of Doors and she does not remember seeing them in the pile of jacket pocket contents in his room upstairs the evening before…

The morning progresses rather nicely – surprisingly pleasantly, in fact – and Alice is a little disappointed to lose her captive audience to their tutor. She hugs William and James and promises she will be back soon for a visit. William maturely smiles back at her from the doorway as James waves goodbye with great, sweeping motions of his whole arm that manage to wiggle his entire body. Laughing, Alice waves back.

When the resulting silence becomes a tad uncomfortable but Hamish seems to have no intention of seeing them to the door, the Hatter – with a conspiratorial look at Alice – excuses himself to use the necessary room. Alice doesn’t doubt he’s standing in the hall, blatantly eavesdropping.
She smiles. And then she turns to Hamish. “What changed your mind about him?” she asks softly, as the question itself seems to require delicate handling.

Hamish gives her a weak glare. “What makes you think I have?”

She grins. “It was the demonstration at dinner last night, wasn’t it?”

“Circumstantial!” he blusters. “I could accuse you of pre-arranging it!”

Alice nods, acknowledging the possibility. “But I didn’t. Come now, Hamish. I can see you’re not so wary of him now. What swayed you?”

He sighs. “You did, Alice.”

“I… beg your pardon?”

Hamish surveys her with his watery-blue eyes. “Your faith in him is rather hard to ignore. You glow with it.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, she says nothing.

“And… also, with the exception of the episode in his room – which is a rather large exception to be making but…!” Hamish clears his throat and starts over, “As a businessman who must be possessive of his company’s property, I can recognize… That is…”

Alice wishes she could deny that the Hatter had not treated her in such a way, but he had. And what’s more, she had allowed it. At the time, it had seemed the simplest way to get their point across: they will not be parted from each other.

“Well,” Hamish abruptly concludes. “The fact that you did not give him your right jab for such a display… and then you permitted him to assist you with your chair at dinner… that speaks very plainly to those who are listening.”

“You’ve been very attentive,” she murmurs, feeling compelled to say something. And, at this point, if Hamish is ignorant of (or, more likely, willing to overlook) the fact that Alice had spent the night in the Hatter’s bed, then she is not about to make matters more difficult for herself by bringing it up now!

The clock in the room fills the silence, marking the seconds as they pass.

“Do you forgive me,” he ventures on a rasp, “for all of the times I imposed upon you to ask for your hand?”

“Oh, Hamish! It was—”

“A mistake the first time I asked and one that I willfully repeated every subsequent time thereafter.”

Alice blinks. “But… if you knew that, then… why did you persist?” She had known that Hamish does not love her, never has and likely never will. She has made her own feelings clear to him again and again: “I’m sorry, Hamish, but you’re not the right man for me. I’ve said it before and I am no different now than I was then.”

Clearly uncomfortable, Hamish replies with candor, “I do care for you, Alice. And my sons adore you. There will never be another Laurel… for me. In asking you, I was guaranteeing that I need never fear…”
“Stop, Hamish. I understand.” And suddenly, she does. Although Alice had been away, setting up trading posts and negotiating contracts in the Far East when Hamish had met and married Laurel Whitcombe, although Alice had never seen the man with his new wife, Alice had seen him after her funeral, a grieving widower. Alice had done her best to cheer him, to bully him if necessary (and it sometimes had been quite necessary!) into spending time with his infant sons and looking after his stake in his father’s company. Yes, Hamish had very clearly loved Laurel. And he very clearly does not wish to risk having his heart broken again. “I was… a safe choice,” she summarizes. “I understand.”

“Far better than most,” he assures her, echoing the very words he had spoken just yesterday.

Alice blinks against sudden tears. “I am sorry.”

“As am I.” He glances away and swallows down the tangle of emotions that could very likely be identical in nature to the knot that Alice feels pressing against the interior of her own throat.

After a long moment, he visibly gathers himself and glances at her. If she were asked to describe the look he gives her, she would have say that it is playfully wry. “That doesn’t mean that I must like that Hightopp fellow.”

Alice laughs softly, unsurprised by his declaration.

But then his expression turns serious. “He is very strange, Alice. And undeniably attached to you.”

_He’s all alone here and I am the only person he trusts_, she wishes she could say. But she will not speak for him, only for herself. “He is also very kind and generous and brave… and I have known him longer than you think, Hamish.”

He raises his brows at this. No doubt he wonders why Alice had never mentioned him before. No doubt he is considering asking that very question.

Alice subverts further interrogation with the simple proclamation: “I need him.”

And just that simply, Hamish’s doubts scatter. “Then keep him. And I suppose it will fall to me to keep my eye on you.”

Alice smiles. “In another era, Lord Ascot, you would have worn shining armor when saying such things.”

He looks quite entertained by the idea. “Indeed. I would have looked rather dashing in it, too.”

When the Hatter re-enters the library and finds Alice laughing and Hamish smiling, he does not seem particularly troubled by their obvious camaraderie.

“Alice,” he lisps, coming to stand beside her and brazenly holding out his hand. She takes it. Hamish pointedly ignores the social gaffe.

“When shall we have a drink?” he inquires, clearly ignoring the fact that it has just gone eleven o’clock in the morning. Declining would undo all that has been accomplished, so Alice and the Hatter accept. They raise their glasses to not-inconceivable possibilities.

As they drink to that, Alice debates how best to thank Hamish for, at last, becoming her friend as well as business associate and colleague. In the end, however, the friendly smile Hamish gives both her and the Hatter proves that no formal thanks are required.
“Have you a strategy for introducing him to your mother and sister?” Hamish suddenly asks, all business. For the first time, Alice believes she will be glad for his input concerning one of her future ventures.

She takes a deep, centering breath. In response, the Hatter rubs his thumb over the back of her hand. “My mother and sister. I know. They have some idea of whom to expect, but I shall have to devise an explanation for how we came to be such close companions, some rationale that they will accept.”

“If I might make a suggestion, Alice,” the Hatter whispers softly. “The lack of an explanation is often forgiven in the face of success.”

When Alice repeats this for Hamish’s benefit, the current Lord Ascot gives the Hatter a bemused smile. “I was right about you. There’s business savvy under that explosion of hair, after all.”

*Business savvy, indeed…* Hamish’s words haunt Alice, teasing her with a possible solution to unanswerable questions. It is very closely related to her thoughts concerning thimbles and her own hat and the impossibility of remaining under the same roof with her mother and sister…

And the idea continues to whisper in her ear through both the farewells and the carriage ride that follows. The Hatter sits, rather improperly, next to her and this small but clear snubbing of What Is Proper reminds Alice of another carriage ride a very long time ago and a conversation that had included, among other things, the mention of a codfish.

“Your concern concerns me,” the Hatter whispers, gently pulling her from her musings. His expression is grave and focused upon her.

“How are you?” she asks. “Does it bother you that we’ve given up on that rabbit hole for the time being?”

He shakes his head. “It will be as you said, Alice. Either another path will present itself to our feet or we shall make our own.” He pauses then and adds haltingly, “It will be our path, will it not?”

“Yes,” she answers, taking his hand. “I simply feared I was… leading you away from… where you felt you needed to be.”

“Silly Alice,” he chastises her and wiggles a bit closer to her on the bench seat.

She leans against his shoulder and gazes out the window. “We’ll be there soon. And I’d like to make one or two things perfectly clear before we get there.”

“The first of which is…?”

“You are unlike any man in this world. Having sailed and seen a quite bit of it, I expect that my evaluation is more accurate than not. My mother and sister will likely assume that it is your very uniqueness which has enchanted me with you, but… er, my mother, sister and I do not always share the same point of view. I expect resistance, initially, but nothing we can’t overcome.”

The Hatter rubs his chin back and forth over her hair as he considers this. “Ye asked mae teh trust ye, laddie. I dae.”

Alice closes her eyes, momentarily overwhelmed with gratitude and a warmth that she has taken to classifying as love. The carriage wheels rattle and roll. The breeze whispers and whistles.

Finally, he prompts, “And the possibly-second point you feel compelled to clarify?”
“We will not be staying with them long.”

“We won’t? But… that is your home, isn’t it?” Clearly, he had expected the Kingsleigh country estate to be their final stop.

Alice leans back and, grinning, whispers, “I have several.”

“Several?”

“Yes. And although it’s a bit soon after returning from abroad for me to take up residence in town, I will ask my maid to prepare my trunk after we arrive. We’ll have lunch and dinner with my mother and sister, and then we’ll leave in the morning for London.”

“And what, may I ask, is a London?”

“A horridly dirty and smelly place where I make my fortune.”

“As stench-ridden as a Bandersnatch nest?”

Alice raises her brows at the comparison. “Perhaps,” she allows, contemplating such a thing for the first time. It truly is a marvel, she muses, that the British will tolerate such outrageous filth and muck in their supposedly grandest city but balk at the sight of a man bedecked in bright colors and smiling a gap-toothed and lazy-eyed smile. Her determination renews; she’ll not let their fear and narrow-mindedness injure the Hatter. They will return to Underland – whatever its condition – before the Hatter gives up his flamboyant fashions and carefree smile.

The remainder of the journey passes as Alice and the Hatter entertain thoughts of impossible things, despite the fact that it is well after breakfast:

“We will pass the scones expeditiously!” Alice informs him.

The Hatter’s brows wiggle with mock concern. “Are you quite skilled at ducking and dodging then?”

“If I’m not,” she counters with a rakish grin, “would you step in and assist me?”

“Step, leap, hop, lurch, stumble, stagger—!” And, a kiss later: “How expeditiously will these scones be passed, do you expect? And will they have been made with heavy cream or light?”

“The cook has never revealed her recipe.”

“Ah. A secret weapon then…”

And then, the Hatter declares, á propros, “We shall all keep our head in the clouds!”

“With a view like that, we’ll surely witness time flying.” Alice clasps his hand tightly in her own and continues, “And should there be any unfortunate lulls in the conversation, the walls will talk.”

“Will it be a stately speech, do you suppose, or a rather tacky one?”

“I confess I expect their tone will be quite wooden.”

By the time they arrive at Alice’s home and disembark, they’ve created quite a list of ridiculous nonsensery. Their giggles have left them breathless and smiling. Alice forcibly ignores her lingering doubts as she hooks her arm through the Hatter’s and leads him toward the front door of the house.
Things progress quickly from the moment it opens: the housekeeper welcomes Alice in her customary dulcet tones and then, turning toward her mistress’ guest, openly gapes at the Hatter. The frozen tableau in the spacious foyer is filed to bursting with Alice’s exasperated humor, the Hatter’s friendly smile, and Mrs. Walace’s shock. It breaks only when Alice’s mother calls out from the parlor.

“We’re in here, Alice!”

Despite this being Alice’s house – and a rather grand one at that, although not so grand as the Ascot estate – she supposes there’s no avoiding the introductions now. The Hatter sighs and, at Alice’s questioning look, wearily shakes his head; it appears as if perfect comprehension of Uplandish English will remain an impossibility. She gives the Hatter’s arm a reassuring pat and waits for him to gather himself. When he is ready, he nods decisively, his green eyes narrowed with fortitude.

Traversing the hall to the room takes both more time and less than normal. She is unnaturally aware of the polished, dark wood banister and its burgundy carpet. The wainscoting and blue-on-blue fluer-de-lis are inexplicably far more demanding of her attention than they ought to be. Yet when Alice pauses on the parlor threshold with the Hatter by her side, she feels rather cheated; she had not had enough time to marvel at the fact that the Hatter is here, with her, in her home. He is real and this is not a dream and…

Alice takes a deep breath, assures herself that she has prepared as best as she can for this meeting. They had articulated all possible impossible things on the journey here and, surely, what comes next will seem dreadfully anticlimactic…

And yet something happens that neither she nor the Hatter had expected.

Helen Kingsleigh, in the midst of crossing the room to embrace her daughter, stops and stares… at a complete loss for words. And Alice’s sister – Margaret Manchester – who is seated comfortably upon the sofa, promptly drops the ball of embroidery thread in her hands… and swoons.
Another moon and another balcony.

Alice pauses on the threshold. The night breeze caresses her bare ankles and plays with the hem of her unfortunately conservative nightdress which peeks out from beneath the edge of her robe. It is a cool night, but her feet are snug in their slippers and the robe is heavy on her shoulders so she doesn’t notice. She notices only one thing, one man – the very same man who had kept her company on the first moonlight balcony Alice had been acquainted with.

And now here he – and that moment – is again.

She hadn’t planned to seek him out tonight. Following dinner, she had led him to his room and wished him goodnight. He hadn’t seemed to object; his smile had been warm and his grip upon her hand gentle. She had shivered with regret when he’d stepped away. But later, as she’d been just about to slide into bed herself, a floorboard in the hall had squeaked sharply. Alice knows that board well. As do her mother and Margaret. They all know to avoid it at night.

The Hatter, however, doesn’t.

Curious, Alice had been drawn to investigate his nighttime wanderings. But not without a good dose of apprehension shadowing her. She had made her way down the hall as silently as possible through the familiar darkness, lecturing herself with every step: she is a grown woman! There is no need for her to feel like a child who expects to be sent back to bed with a firm scolding!

She had distracted herself from the possibility of such a by wondering what might have drawn the Hatter not only out of bed but out of his room tonight, prompting her reconnaissance mission.

And here, on the garden terrace, she has found him. He is standing in almost the exact place where their luncheon table had been set up earlier that afternoon. The light of the moon (which daringly glares down upon the earth through irregular windows in the clouds) bathes him in a ghostly glow. The Hatter – and the scene he creates – had made her pause. It reminds her of another night, on the eve of another battle.

Battle. Yes, today’s had been stressful, sometimes-uncomfortable, and even now the outcome is uncertain… and tomorrow – London – may well be worse. Alice continues to hesitate on the threshold. The night breeze plays with her hair rather than rubs against her ankles as she recalls the trials and tribulations of the day.

“Er, I did say ‘magnificently eccentric’ in my letter?” Alice had checked as she’d patted her sister’s flushed cheeks with a cool, damp handkerchief. (Bright pink and promptly provided by the Hatter. He had readily offered it up for the cause in the same moment in which Alice had glanced toward the water pitcher on the sideboard.) Helen Kingsleigh had seemed rather mesmerized by the handkerchief and Alice had been required to repeat herself more than once before her mother had seemed to actually hear her.

“I believe the exact word was ‘marvelous’, ” Helen had corrected her weakly. “Marvelous eccentricities…”

It had been very clear to her then that her mother’s expectations – despite the warning she’d sent the night before – had been rather wide of the mark. “Ah…” is all she had said. Really, what else could she say? If her mother and sister had been startled this badly despite Alice’s best attempt to prepare them, then how could she trust any other explanation to suffice?
“Alice?” Margaret, slowly coming to, had rasped on a guarded whisper.

“Yes?” Alice had asked gently, mindful of her elder sister’s still-bleary gaze and fluttering lashes.

Hesitantly, Margaret had ventured, “Did I just imagine an orange man in a kilt on your arm?”

“Er… no, Magpie, I’m afraid not. Are you ready to meet him or shall we save that for later?” The following pause had been telling. “Later then. Right.”

And later it had been. Alice had called for her maid, Louisa, and quickly arranged for luncheon to be held on the terrace and then she had escorted the Hatter from the threshold he’d been rather patiently occupying. They had made their way upstairs, ostensibly on a tour of the house and rather obviously leaving her mother and sister to recover from the shock in peace.

Their tour had ended in the family’s sewing room. “The shops in London will have a more typical selection,” Alice had babbled, unaccountably nervous, as the Hatter had surveyed the room in its entirety, “and I know many of these are rather dull – Margaret’s fabric orders, no doubt – but if you find anything you like…”

“Trousers seem to be the custom here,” he’d mused, looking over stacks of brightly patterned and interestingly textured fabrics that Alice had brought back from her journeys. She had always intended to have pantsuits or coats or dresses made from them, but in the end had never taken the time to place the order with a tailor. Looking at the Hatter as he had gently fingered a swatch of brocade that she’d picked up in India, Alice had at last admitted the truth: she’d bought these – each and every one of them – with him in mind.

“Might I make use of this bolt?” he’d asked with a hopeful grin.

In answer, Alice had leaned in close and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Use one, use them all. They’re yours, love. Always have been.”

His brows had arched nearly right off his head at that admission. “Alice you…?”

“I never forgot you, Hatter.” Waving to the stacks of fabric bolts, she’d concluded, “Here’s the evidence.”

His hands had twitched briefly before tentatively cradling her face. His grin had been so wide that no words – not even a “Thank you, Alice” – had escaped. Alice had gently squeezed his wrists in understanding and then watched as a cunning gleam had entered his eyes an instant before the fabrics had once again claimed his attention.

Alice had seated herself on an old, last-of-a-dining-set chair and watched the Hatter work. He’d manned the sewing machine with ease, making Alice glad that she’d bought the thing despite protests from her mother and sister who had vowed never to use the contraption. At the Hatter’s request, she had taken his measurements.

“No, no, not at the waist Alice, please. What sort of trousers would be the result of that? No, I shall need to know the distance between the tip of my nose and my left shoulder… No, no. The other left, laddie.”

It had been, without a doubt, the most interesting tailoring session Alice has ever partaken in – positively educational! She’d learned that the Hatter’s elbows are ticklish and the skin of his neck looks rosy compared to the dull, greyish hue of the measuring tape… She had also learned that the Hatter rewards his assistants very generously for a job well done.

Breaking the soft, unhurried, and magnificently thorough kiss, Alice had whispered, “I hope it’s
not your custom to thank all your workers thusly."

He’d giggled.  “One and all!”

She’d pinched him in retaliation for the teasing.  He’d yelped with more enthusiasm than necessary, eliciting one more kiss from Alice: an apology.

Louisa had knocked on the door shortly after and called them to lunch.  And lunch… Well… Alice supposes it could have been both better and worse…

“Mother, Margaret,” Alice had practically sung with confidence that had only been shaky around the very edges.  The table that had – rather intimidatingly – been set to perfection on the terrace overlooking the garden and Alice had been glad for the Hatter’s solid presence.  It had reminded her – briefly – of seeing the Jabberwocky for the first time, interestingly enough.  Despite the wimble-wobble of her nerves, Alice had triumphed – completing the introductions as polite manners dictate: “This is Mister Tarrant Hightopp, a hatter of extraordinary skill and vision.”

“Mister Hightopp,” Helen had said, standing and offering her hand.  “Thank you for joining us for luncheon.”

The Hatter had rather brilliantly avoided the necessity of responding verbally by collecting Helen Kingsleigh’s hand carefully in both of his own and bowing – with great extravagance that had made Alice’s cheeks ache with the size of her grin and her heart swell alarmingly with affection – over first her mother’s and then her sister’s offered hands.  Alice had somehow managed to finish the standardized greetings and small talk despite the smile which should have made speech impossible.

And then the Hatter had assisted Alice with her chair, moving with deliberate grace.  Alice remembers that moment now as she studies him in his stillness in the light of the moon.  His grace at luncheon had entranced her.  Her pulse had begun to race and her lower belly had inexplicably tightened as she’d remembered that lithe strength.  She had glimpsed it on the battlefield, when he had fought Stayne, and – more recently – she had felt it against her own body…

Luckily her mother had interrupted her thoughts before her eyes had glazed over completely.  “Alice?”

She had rather guiltily snapped back to attention.  “Hm?  I’m sorry, Mother.  What were you saying?”

Her mother and sister’s concerned looks had smoothed away, but Alice’s moment of relief had been limited.  She had glanced at the Hatter then and the brief sensual-memory-filled look he had given her had turned that cool afternoon into a decidedly warmer weather event.

“I was wondering,” Helen had begun, “how it is you two came to be acquaintances.”

Alice had considered lying.  She’d considered telling the truth.  She’d considered how much a nice plate of tossable scones would be welcome at that precise moment…

With a bright smile, Alice had said, “Well, it all began when I fell down a rabbit hole—”

Surprisingly, Margaret had laughingly sighed out an exasperated breath.  “Oh, Alice.  Not another one of your stories!”

“My stories are quite good!” she’d replied with mock affront, placing her napkin upon her lap.  “Very original with fascinating characters.  You’re in need of a better ear, Magpie.”
Helen’s sigh had been noticeably heavy with the weight of tolerance.

Alice had relented in the face of her mother’s wordless prompting. “Oh, very well. It wasn’t a rabbit hole, then. It was the lake at the Ascot estate. You see, it was such a nice day, so I suggested a picnic as the setting for our business lunch…” That had not been the entire truth – no, of course not! – but Alice had refused to bring up the fact that Hamish had asked her to accompany him. That revelation would have only begged more questions, chiefly: Why? And then: What did he wish to discuss? And undoubtedly: What did you tell the poor man this time, Alice? Out of respect for Hamish and for the Hatter, there had been no point in bringing all that up again.

So she had cunningly distracted her mother and sister from whatever discussion may or may not have taken place between herself and Hamish by dramatically narrating her own near-drowning in a lake that is quite innocent of the charge.

“And then the Hatter pulled me out of the water,” she’d concluded grandly. “I’m sure you can imagine how glad I was to see him! And Lord Ascot – as I mentioned in my letter – was kind enough to offer us hospitality until our things were wearable again.”

The story she’d told them has more eyeholes than one of those wretched corsets that are so in fashion these days. Alice doesn’t doubt that both her mother and sister had noticed that very fact, although, oddly enough, neither had said a word. Perhaps, in the face of Alice’s obvious happiness, they hadn’t dared.

Alice leans against the open French door and considers her lover. Her brilliant and wonderfully mad lover. The Hatter had been right when he’d declared that a lack of logic could be forgiven in the face of success. If Alice’s happiness is that success, then perhaps that is why her family had forgiven her for her lies.

“It was quite fortunate that you happened to be there, Mister Hightopp,” Margaret had remarked pleasantly as Helen had stared at Alice in silent reprimand. Yes, yes, Alice ought to know better than to daydream and such so near a lake; she ought to keep her head out of the clouds and so on and so forth. Honestly, near death experiences are not all that interesting, but Alice can see why her mother might assume her youngest daughter’s opinion on the subject to be otherwise. It is Alice’s own fault for parading her exploits so blatantly… and for so many years. Or perhaps this is merely another failure in communication: Alice’s definition of dangerous deeds surely does not match her mother’s.

“Very fortunate,” Alice had gladly agreed. “Truly, there is not a single good reason for why I was there or why the Hatter happened by when he did… It was fate, surely.”

She’d then shared a smile with the Hatter who had looked quite charming and boyish in that moment. So much so that Helen had seemed compelled to point out, “We’ve yet to hear your side of the story, Mister Hightopp.”

In that moment, things could have gone very badly, Alice knows. That moment had been the turning point in their metaphorical battle, and the Hatter had trusted Alice to lead them both to victory. With a silent nudge, he had urged her onward.

Alice bites back a smile as the conversation that had followed comes back to her…

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Mother. Erm, you see, he doesn’t speak our Queen’s English.”

“Well, what sort of English do you speak, then, sir?” Margaret responded with uncanny insight.
“You wouldn’t believe your ears if he so much as wished you a good afternoon,” Alice declared haughtily.

“I beg your pardon!”

“In fact,” Alice blithely concluded, contemplating the condiments tray, “I’d wager you would swoon right into the chutney.”

“I fear you’ll be sorely disappointed!”

“Oh, will I?”

“It’s a guarantee!”

“You’ll want to be wary of broken promises, Magpie. They’ve quite sharp edges.”

“Alice! I will not swoon!”

Alice lifted her water glass with a bored air. “Will,” she argued and then took a sip.

“Will not!”

“Hm… I think you will.”

Looking well and truly incensed now (Fantastic! To Alice’s knowledge, no one has ever fainted from irritation.) Margaret carefully enunciated, “For the last time, Alice—”

“Marvelous!” she replied. “Then I shall have the final word!”

Eyes narrowed, Margaret gritted out, “I will not swoon.”

Alice suppressed a grin and lifted a dainty ham sandwich to her lips. “Will,” she said before enjoying a bite.

“Oh, for the love of the queen, Alice!” Helen huffed. “You behave as if Mister Hightopp is a backwards man who lives on a backwards hill or some such. Honestly, if it were up to you, you’d have us believe that he walks on his hands.”

“Er…” Alice blinked at her mother and then glanced at the Hatter.

“Indeed, Alice,” Margaret interjected. “Perhaps you’ve convinced Mister Hightopp to speak in nothing but rhyming couplets in order to shock us.”

Alice rallied, “And what would it matter should he speak in iambic pentameter?”

Beside her, the Hatter giggled helplessly. “I believe you just did!” he lisped on a laughter-infused whisper. “And made a rhyme, by the by!”

She shared a triumphant grin with him in the moment before Margaret’s gasp interrupted.

“Oh… my…”

Alice waited, but her sister simply gaped at the Hatter. Clearing her throat, Alice broke the tableau: “I believe you’ve misplaced a word, Magpie. The one you’re looking for – that is, the one that typically follows those first two – is ‘lord’, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Good gracious, Alice!” Margaret stuttered, ignoring her sister’s playful sarcasm. “This is…
He…! Mister Hightopp,” Margaret began, addressing him directly and practically glowing with inquisitiveness.

“Yes, Madam Manchester?”

Margaret blinked at him once, twice, and then frantically waved a hand at Alice to call her attention. The gesture was utterly unnecessary, however, as Alice was still riveted by the exchange. “Did he just say my name, do you think?”

“That’s precisely what he said,” Alice replied. “The word ‘madam’ sounds the same front-to-back as it does back-to-front,” Alice lectured as she watched her mother watch the Hatter.

“Do you mean…!” Margaret gave the Hatter a reevaluating look. The Hatter gave her a friendly smile. “Mister Hightopp speaks in the reverse?”

“Yes,” Alice answered. “’Mirror-wise’ is the term I use.” Alice waited for her mother to say something… anything. But when no comment was forthcoming, Alice summoned a smile and a summary, “Fantastic, isn’t it?”

“It’s mad!” Margaret declared, looking thoroughly entertained.

“My point exactly!” Alice agreed enthusiastically, charmed by Margaret’s obvious glee. “Extraordinary!”

Yes, he is, Alice silently concurs with her memory. Seeing the Hatter contemplating the garden from the moonlight-made silver stone terrace calls forth many such impressions, including the other balcony they had once occupied together. She remembers that he had hesitated on the threshold, much like she is doing now. Had it been for the same reasons? An over-abundance of inarticulate-able thoughts warring with the need for a companion who understands the restless anxiety of undefined and unknown (but undeniably imminent) challenges on the morrow?

She thinks of their scheduled departure for London and experiences the distinct sensation of things-left-undone. They are no closer to finding a way back to Underland, and leaving the countryside feels like a forfeiture. But what other options do they have? If their time here in Upland is limited, then Alice will show him as much of her world as she can and, in doing so, perhaps she will never have to truly say farewell to it. If the memory exists within both her own mind and the Hatter’s, then they might visit it again together merely by closing their eyes and whispering.

Alice will miss her family when she and the Hatter return to Underland. But perhaps this way – this farewell – better than her sudden tumble down the rabbit hole. This way, her family will know that she is making a new life for herself with someone she loves. Surely, they will be happy for her, even if they are also sad to see her go.

She thinks of her mother and knows it will be hard for her to accept. In fact, Alice admits uncomfortably, her mother had not seemed to accept much of anything. She had hardly said two words during the remainder of lunch and Margaret’s demand for Alice’s services as a translator had prevented her from investigating the mystery of her mother’s silence. Margaret had then insisted on accompanying Alice in showing the Hatter the grounds and Helen had excused herself. When dinner had arrived, Alice had done her best to draw her into conversation, but her mother’s responses had been succinct and vague. Not rude, perhaps, but… unwelcoming of further conversation. Oh, her mother had been pleasant to the Hatter, certainly. It is simply that she had seemed… concerned. Although concerned about what exactly Alice cannot even begin to guess. (Perhaps, if her own mind were less… contrary, then she might have managed to anticipate this worry.) However, Alice decides not to waste any more time contemplating it now.
No doubt, it will be revealed on the morrow when her family realizes her intention to not only accompany the Hatter to London, but to remain with him there indefinitely.

There are many things to discuss. Perhaps that is why Alice pushes all of them away. Approaching the man on the terrace with careful steps, she asks softly, “Have you any idea why a raven is like a writing desk?”

The Hatter turns and smiles with delight. “Yes,” he says softly, destroying the mirror image of that years-old memory. “They are alike in the same way that hay and ham sandwiches are similar!”

Alice grins, marveling at his nonsense.

He leans in and kisses her gently. Alice wraps an arm around his shoulders. When he pulls back, she keeps it there and he keeps his around her waist. They regard the moonlight-dappled lawn. The clouds above move swiftly and the darkness around them shifts from pitch black to tarnished silver again and again at irregular intervals.

“Did I apologize properly for startling your mother and sister when we arrived?” he mutters softly. “I meant to, but I cannot recall if…”

“It’s fine,” Alice assures him. “They seemed rather relieved that we didn’t bring it up, actually.”

He considers that before turning his attention to the pruned-with-precision grounds and then, finally, he surveys Alice’s very conservatively-tailored night things. “I believe I understand now, Alice,” the Hatter lisps softly, raising his gaze to hers. “Why it is you fell into Underland not once but…”

“Ah… yes.” She supposes it is rather obvious now how very unlike her own people she is. “I suppose I am rather… mad here. Still, you mustn’t underestimate Uplanders, Hatter,” she argues. “Your ways might startle them, but they adapt quickly.” Or rather, Alice hopes that will continue to be the case! Margaret had seemed quite taken with him, in the end. Alice’s mother on the other hand… well, she’s sure that sooner or later she will learn the reason for her unusually reserved mood. She leans closer to the Hatter, tightening her arm around him.

He muses, “I must seem rather… well, in comparison to such tamed surroundings and… well, I haven’t encountered so much as a talking cat in this country of yours! They are rather curious and pompous creatures, you know. It’s inevitable that you’ll cross paths with one, no matter where you travel. And yet, here…”

“Here there are no such things. Merely cats. Pompous and curious, yes, but…” She sighs, wondering again what has become of Chessur and Mallyumkun, Thackery and Nivens, the White Queen and the Tweedles, Bayard and the Bandersnatch… “So many things that are possible in Underland are utterly impossible here.”

“Then it follows that many things that are possible here are impossible in Underland,” he deduces.

For the first time, Alice considers that possibility. “You’re correct,” she answers. “I simply never looked at it that way before…”

The Hatter turns toward her, prompting her to finish that thought with an inquisitive twitch of his brows.

“Upland…” But no, that isn’t what she means to say. “England,” she corrects herself, “the country we are in now, despite having a queen, is a man’s society. I never would have become a successful businesswoman without the late Lord Ascot’s continuous support. In his will, he
named me president of a subsidiary of his company. Actually, I now run the very company that my father started years and years ago. Most women never have such an opportunity. All of this —” She gestures to the house and grounds. “—is mine because a man willed it to be so. I have no illusions about how tenuous that state is.”

Alice secretly dreads the day when either the board members of the company grow greedy or times become hard and they actively begin to move against her, mutiny as it were. They tolerate her now because Alice’s unconventional ways have made them all very rich men. Alice had learned – from Lord Ascot himself – that the best way to maintain control is through generosity. Luckily, the company has been successful enough to afford Alice – and, by extension, her mother and sister – a great deal of financial security. The funds she has already earned are safe, Alice knows, but the future is always uncertain.

“In Underland, the path was mine to make. Even though the Oraculum showed my confrontation with the Jabberwocky, there was no indication of my victory. We did that,” she tells him, studying his expression. “Together, you and I did that.”

“I have not seen any Jabberwockies here,” he points out helpfully and Alice grins widely.

“No, no Jabberwockies, thankfully.”

The Hatter lifts a hand and begins deftly tucking wayward strands of her hair behind her ears. “I do believe that you prefer Underland.”

“Yes, you are correct.” Despite the sheer overwhelming oddness of the place, yes, Alice prefers it. It is only her confidence in herself that wavers from time to time. If she returns to face yet another adventure, will she rise to the challenge as she had before? Is she still that Alice?

“Absolutely Alice,” he lisps, unknowingly reassuring her.

In thanks for his uncanny ability to lift her spirits, Alice kisses him. As she does so, a Thought occurs to her. “Why didn’t you kiss me that night on the balcony? On the eve of Frabjous Day?” she whispers against his lips.

“Ye were just a wee lad, then, Alice,” he replies in a startled tone. Clearly, he feels that the reason should be self-evident.

Alice persists, “And yet you waited for me in that room, dressed as you were…” She gives him a long look. “That kilt is for special occasions, isn’t it?”

“Your return was a special occasion.”

“Hatter…” she pleads softly, gently shaking him by his jacket lapels. “Why did you wait for me?”

His hands settle on her waist and his thumbs draw lazy half circles through the fabric that separates his touch from her skin. “Ye vowed teh b’back afore I kenned it… an’ I…” He studies her intently as the moonlight fades and then washes over them again. “I ken hauw Time is ‘ere… I kenned ye woul’ come back an’ when ye did… ye woul’ nae launger be a wee lad…”

Alice closes her eyes and presses her lips to his chin, his jaw, the lobe of his left ear… Of all the things in the world there are to wish for, of all the dreams she could spend a thought on wanting to make real, the only thing she truly desires is to be worthy of all the waiting he had done for her.

“I was such a silly girl, a thoughtless child, and yet you…” She has no words to accurately define the scope of his vision and generosity. He had quite possibly loved her even then and yet she had not seen it – had not been capable of seeing it – nor had she deserved it. Debatably, she does not
even deserve it now. A wave of guilt crashes over her at the thought of how delightfully strange the last two days have been… all because Underland is underwater.

Alice cannot think of a single person more selfish than herself.

“Tarrant…” she dares, addressing him by his given name for the first time.

“Yes, your Majesty?”

She presses her forehead to his shoulder and smiles against the fabric. She inhales and thinks that it smells like him. Or perhaps he smells like it. The scent is marvelous, either way. “You think too highly of me, and I do not think—”

“Then ye shoul’nae speak,” he hushes her, his arms pulling her closer until it would take more effort than she cares to expend to draw a breath deep enough with which to argue. She subsides. Some other time, perhaps, he will be willing to hear her apologies. Not tonight.

Tonight, on this terrace, in the light of this moon, there are soft kisses and warm nuzzling caresses and soft sighs. And if Alice suspects that someone is watching her and Tarrant from the shadows of the house, she tells herself she doesn’t care. She can guess who it is and if her mother feels the need to play chaperone, so be it. When Alice begins yawning at regular intervals, the Hatter escorts her to her room and tucks her in bed. She makes an inarticulate sound of grumpy dissatisfaction when he moves away.

“Nae, my Alice. I’ll nae stay.”


“Tomorrow,” he agrees, brushing his fingers through her hair and humming *Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat* until she falls asleep.

The next morning, Alice discovers that she had been correct about her mother and sister and their reaction to Alice’s premature move to town.

“Mister Hightopp,” Margaret addresses him when Alice excuses both of them from breakfast with a “Well, it’s off to London, then!”

Holding out her hand, her sister announces, “It was a great pleasure meeting you. Thank you for indulging my curiosity.”

Alice translates this and conveys the Hatter’s eloquent reply: “I am always honored to be permitted to encourage curiosity, madam.”

“Louisa?” Alice quietly prompts her maid.

“Yes, Miss Kingsleigh, your trunks are ready.”

“Thank you—”

“Trunks?” Margaret sputters as Helen gasps softly.

Alice tries to ignore the feeling of cowardice that haunts her as she fiddles with her gloves. “Yes, well, I know I’ve only just returned, but there’s really so much to be done that I believe I’d best transfer myself to town.” And then Alice deliberately places her hand on the Hatter’s arm.

The implications are clear. They resonate in the silence. Alice watches the conclusions form in
her mother and sister’s expressions. Helen looks… alarmed but stoically maintains her composure. Margaret, on the other hand, is far more blatant with her reaction as she realizes that when Alice had introduced the Hatter to them as an acquaintance, she had actually been preparing them for this moment, this unveiling of the depth of his true importance to Alice.

“And… where will Mister Hightopp be staying?” her sister queries daringly.

“With me.”

Margaret is left speechless.

“Alice,” Helen finally whispers hoarsely. Alice suppresses a wince. Now she will hear what has been on her mother’s mind, she is sure of it! “Might I have a word? In private?”

“Of course, Mother.” With a reassuring squeeze to the Hatter’s arm and a brave smile, she gently removes her hand from his elbow and follows her mother into the parlor where, just yesterday afternoon, Margaret had fainted rather spectacularly.

Helen closes the door softly behind them. Alice waits for her to speak first, launch the first volley, as it were.

“Darling…” Helen begins carefully. “This man, Mister Hightopp…”

It is too soon to really know what objection her mother is about to raise. All Alice knows is that an objection is on the tip of Helen’s tongue and it pertains to the Hatter. Alice cannot restrain herself from presenting whatever counter-attack she can manage. “I know he seems very strange, but he’s really a wonderful gentleman and… well,” Alice briefly considers her words. Perhaps a bit of ambiguity would not be awry? “I’ve some ideas… regarding his future, you see. If he is of the same mind, then our association could be very rewarding.”

Her mother knows her too well to be comforted by that vague reassurance. Hesitantly and with no small amount of suspicion, Helen postulates, “So, am I to understand that you are merely assisting him out of a sense of charity, Alice?”

“I… What?” Charity? True, it had been hard to miss the fact that he’d arrived with only the clothes on his back, but…! Oh, bugger all. Perhaps Alice had best stick to telegraph messages. Verbal communication and correspondence via letters are failing her miserably in recent days.

“Ah. Yes,” Helen surmises, looking as if she’d very much like to sit down. “That’s what I feared.”

“What you feared?”

Alice gapes openly until her mother sighs and reaches out a hand to rub her shoulder warmly. “Don’t be upset with me, darling. What am I supposed to think? Lady Ascot sends the most atrocious note and yours following it is only marginally more comforting and then you show up on a mad tinker’s arm—”

“Mother! How could you… you…!” Right. Enough is enough. Time to deal with this misunderstanding so that it is properly forgotten and never brought up again. “By your standards, I am a mad tinker! Have you always judged me so harshly?”

“This is not about judgment,” Helen insists with poise.

“What is it about then?” she challenges doggedly.
“This is about your future, Alice.” She studies her mother’s expression and cannot find fault with it. She is genuinely worried. “You’ve worked so hard over the years, providing for your sister and for me… even though it was not your responsibility to do so.” They do not mention the name of the man whose responsibility it should have been. Lowell has been persona non grata in this house for years. Helen continues, “The accomplishments you’ve made and the reputation you have built for yourself… what will happen to all of that when London Society learns of your association with… someone like Mister Hightopp?”

“Someone like Mister Hightopp,” Alice echoes, disbelieving. “Precisely what is it about him that you are objecting to? His orange-ness?”

Helen shakes her head helplessly, clearly indicating that there exist far too many unfortunate faults to list. “Alice, darling, please think carefully about all you may be throwing away if you continue to associate with him.”

“What about all that I may be gaining?” Very deliberately, Alice places a hand over her lower belly. The gesture is not lost on her mother. Helen visibly pales.

“Oh, Alice… What have you done?”

“I’m a grown woman, Mother, and I’ve found the right man for me. As for my reputation…” She shakes her head. “I won’t say it doesn’t matter, because we both know differently, but you’re wrong about him. He’s going to be a marvelous hit in London. You’re worrying about all the wrong things.”

“I hope so, Alice. I sincerely hope so.”

The urge to defend the Hatter is nearly overwhelming, but Alice knows she is toeing the line drawn by ladies who doth protest too much. Alice wrestles with her urge to have the last word. Wrestles… and wins. With a nod, she sweeps past her mother and lets herself out of the room. She is not surprised to find both Margaret and the Hatter standing in the hall just on the other side of the door, clearly guilty of eavesdropping.

Margaret glances, wide-eyed, from Alice to the Hatter and back again.

“Yes, Magpie?” Alice asks, offering her hand to the Hatter for him to take. He expertly tucks it into the crook of his elbow.

“Er… the coachman,” Margaret rasps, “wanted to know… the bolts of fabric…”

Ah, a logistics issue. That Alice can deal with. “Thank you. I’ll see to it. Keep in touch,” she bids her, stepping forward to press a quick kiss to her sister’s cheek. The walk to the front door seems to stretch on for miles. Alice half expects her mother and sister to attempt to forcibly restrain her from leaving… but of course they don’t. Alice breathes a breath of relief when the Hatter escorts her through the door and out onto the drive.

As requested, she confers with the coachman and confirms that, yes, she is quite satisfied with having the paper-wrapped bolts of exotic fabrics strapped to both the boot and the flat top of the carriage. It is a small thing – a truly tiny issue – but she enjoys an instant of accomplishment; she has managed to resolve something even if she is currently running away from all of the major problems that ought to receive her attention: her mother’s worries, her sister’s shock, the fate of Underland…

But no more today. She is exhausted and it’s not even ten o’clock in the morning.

She accepts the Hatter’s solid and strong assistance into the carriage and looks back at her family
standing on the doorsteps. As the carriage lurches forward on its journey, Alice forces herself to wave farewell to her mother and sister. She doesn’t doubt that she hasn’t heard the last of their reactions to all of this, but that’s no reason to allow her pique and shock and disappointment with them to get the better of her. After all, who knows when another path to Underland will present itself? This may be the last time she sees them…

And then she does not see them at all. The carriage follows the bend in the drive and the house and grounds are obscured by trees. Alice leans back in her seat and tries not to sigh.

For long moments, they travel in silence. She endures the cacophony of the wheels, the mind-numbing rhythm of the hoof-beats of the horses, the miscellaneous creaks and squeaks of the vehicle itself… The Hatter’s stillness becomes increasingly unnerving until Alice cannot bear it any longer. She reaches for his right hand, collecting it in her left, and studies it in the diffused light that illuminates the interior of the carriage through the open curtain of the side window.

The Hatter’s attention is riveted on their clasped hands. “Shall I apologize now, Alice?” he whispers after a very long moment. “Your mother is correct: they are a tinker’s hands… a mad tinker’s hands…”

For a moment, Alice wonders if Tarrant had somehow understood the conversation… but no. Alice had used those very words herself in objection. The Hatter had merely inferred the gist of Helen’s comments from Alice’s reaction… which she had stated quite loudly.

“Yes, they are,” she agrees. “And no, you should not apologize. I forbid you from feeling the need to do so at all. These are the hands of a brilliant man. My Hatter.”

Sighing out his worry and stress, he burrows his nose into her unbound hair and breathes deeply. “Aye, laddie. Aye.” He pulls himself closer to her on the bench seat. “I only hope I’ll not disappoint you in this London, Alice.”

“I don’t believe that’s possible,” she reassures him.

He presses his lips to her temple in thanks and then mutters haltingly, “I’ve already let you down… Your mother…”

“Is not the parent from whom I get my sense of vision,” she deftly interrupts him. “She needs time and opportunity to see in you what I see. Everything will be fine,” she counsels him… and takes some comfort in her own words.

Their arrival at Alice’s home in the frumious city of London holds true to the recent pattern of disbelief, shock, and general contrariness that has been established over the past few days.

“Mister Hightopp will stay here?” her housekeeper objects, astounded by Alice’s daring. “As your guest? Unchaperoned?”

“That is correct, Marta. Please see that the guestroom is in good condition.”

Alice leaves the coachman and the housekeeper to their tasks and escorts the Hatter into the parlor where they will be out of the way. She briefly flips through the pile of calling cards that had been left for her since her return to England and the Hatter wanders over to the window. Twitching the curtains aside, he regards the soot-smudged street beneath the grey, overcast sky.

At one point, Alice glances up in time to catch him considering his trousers: his newly-tailored trousers – longer than the style he had worn in Underland – yet created from a fabric far more brilliant than his previous pair had been made from. Alice regards the eye-wateringly bright combination of peacock blue jacket, indigo vest, pink dress shirt, and emerald green trousers.
He frowns mightily at himself. Alice hums an inquiring tone and waits until he seems ready to speak. The Hatter mutters in an evaluating tone, “I believe I made the trousers long enough. It must be the color.” He glances up. “That has been causing the epidemic of unhinged jaws and wide eyes upon making my acquaintance,” he explains further.

Smiling, Alice corrects him, “Colors.”

“So is it true that Lord Ascot’s utterly bland sense of fashion is the norm?” The question is rhetorical. He sighs moodily and spares one more glance out the window at what Alice expects are grey, brown, and black-clad passersby.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He contemplates this for a moment, sighs once more, and then warns her, “I shall have to ask you to kill time if I’m to make a new suit for myself before we venture out today…”

Alice abandons her correspondence. She rounds the corner of the writing desk and reaches for his hand. “I wouldn’t advise such a thing.”

“True, Time can be quite irritable when dead.”

“No, no, Hatter. The suit. You needn’t make it.”

“Why-ever not?” he responds with honest confusion. In her grasp, his fingers are constantly moving, twitching and caressing. “Would it not make the tasks ahead of us a lesser challenge if I were more—?”

“Challenges be damned! I don’t want an Almost Hatter or a Not Hardly Hatter,” she chides him, releasing his hand in order to un-straighten his bow tie. “I’m actually rather envious of the combinations. You have so many outer garments to coordinate yet I’ve only a skirt and blouse. Rather dull, if you ask me.”

The Hatter blinks once before his gaze sweeps erratically over her. When he next looks into her eyes, his own are practically glowing with an idea. Alice can guess just what sort of idea it might be, too. With any luck it will coordinate well with the proposal she would like to make him. Well, no time like the present!

“It will take some time for everything to be readied here. Let’s go out,” she declares, reaching for her satchel.

“Out?” he echoes with a nervous twitch of his wild brows.

Alice bites back a laugh at his alarmed expression. “Yes, out. My office isn’t far. Have you a handkerchief handy?”

The Hatter produces a canary yellow square of embroidered linen. “Of course! Handy and in hand! It wouldn’t be much of a handkerchief otherwise!”

“Indeed it wouldn’t,” she agrees and produces one of her own. “Excellent. We’ll arrive at our destination none the worse for wear, then.”

They depart via the rear entrance to the house. It is only mid-afternoon, but the sky is darker than intuition expects with coal smoke from the factories. Alice applies her kerchief to her face and the Hatter does likewise. The Hatter offers her his free arm and Alice leads the way. As they navigate the streets, she can’t help but notice how this bare-headed, brightly-clothed man stands...
out like a majestic orchid amongst muddy grass. Oh, yes. London Society needs Tarrant Hightopp… they simply don’t know it yet.

They pass a variety of shops, and Alice pauses occasionally to allow the Hatter to peer in through the grimy windows as she lists the content of their wares. “This one,” she says, gesturing briefly with her handkerchief, “sells inks and pens, parchment and such.” She considers the necessity of having calling cards made for the Hatter… but that will have to come later. They’ve still the issue of language to sort out… if it can be sorted out.

“And this one?” he interrupts, pausing meaningfully before a poor, wretchedly dirty shop.

“Nothing at the moment, although it used to be a men’s suit emporium. If you look just there, you can catch a reflection in the looking glass.”

He cranes his neck to see and, after a moment, they continue on. The next time they stop, it is at Alice’s request.

“This is your office?” Tarrant mutters through the layers of haphazardly folded handkerchief.

“Er, well, no,” Alice admits, urging him up to the door. “It’s a teashop. We missed lunch.”

“Ah, marvelous!” he declares, moving with alacrity now to open the door for her. “I was beginning to wonder if lunch wasn’t an everyday event here!”

Alice procures a table and orders for both of them. As they wait (and as they ignore the pointed stares and hushed, gossipy whispers of the other patrons), she tells him of her business and what she does at her office on typical days.

“And on untypical days?” he asks with avid interest.

“Well, I suppose those would be spent aboard a ship, sailing.”

“I’ve never been on a ship,” he declares.

“It’s much like this establishment,” she replies, waving a hand to indicate the small, dark, cramped atmosphere.

He wrinkles his nose at their surroundings. “Ah.”

Alice laughs quietly then reaches across the table to pat his hand. “I will give you a tour of the Wonder sometime.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” he muses wittily.

“Both,” she replies. “From the outside, the ship looks rather romantic. It’s only the interior that is rather… less than exciting.” Alice had spent quite a lot of time above deck for that very reason despite having a rather comfortable suite to herself.

Their tea is delivered and as the Hatter creams, sugars, and pours their cups, she asks, “Hatter… if our return to Underland continues to be delayed… well, have you given any thought to what you would like to do here in the meantime?”

“That,” he replies, passing Alice her teacup, “is a whiting.”

“Slippery and difficult to grasp?” she defines.

“Precisely. I am a hatter, and yet I am unsure if the hatters here are me.”
Alice chuckles. “That is an excellent point. No one here is like you, love.”

“That is very untrue, Alice.”

She looks up, startled, and finds herself on the receiving end of his piercingly sensual stare. Oh. Yes, well, perhaps she is the one exception.

The tea is weak and the sandwiches are dry, but Alice would not change the moment for anything. She is suddenly struck by the realization that the Hatter must be real and this must not be a dream because, in the midst of all this tiresomely rational reality, here he sits. With her.

With teatime finished, Alice promises the stop at her office will be quick. “I only need to collect something…”

And yet, upon their arrival, her office assistant endeavors to make that vow difficult to keep.

“Miss Kingsleigh!” the man at the reception desk announces with profound relief. Alice is unsure, but it looks as if the poor fellow has lost even more of his greying hair since he’d met her at the wharf last week. Well, at least his waistcoat is rather smart. “Welcome back!”

“Thank you, Mister Phelps.”

“You’ve several messages—”

“I always do. How else would you earn your salary?” she teases him with a perfectly straight face.

“And Sir Godfry stopped in today inquiring about the—”

“Spices that he has yet to pay for, yes,” she summarizes, still moving the Hatter through the lobby and toward her office.

“Also, there was a man from—”

“Mister Phelps, have I left you alone here so long that you’ve forgotten your manners? This,” she says with a demonstrative gesture, “is Mister Tarrant Hightopp.”

“Oh, good gracious, I do apologize, sir!”

The Hatter nods, his green eyes sparkling with mirth.

“Now, as I was saying, Miss Kingsleigh, there was a man from the papers here asking about Japan.”

“Botheration!” She’d completely forgotten about that. She’d promised the papers an account of Japan as well as sketches upon her return. “Bugger all,” she mutters, making the Hatter giggle and Mister Phelps fidget nervously.

“I’ve composed replies to the most urgent correspondence, ma’am. If you would but approve them…”

With an apologetic look at the Hatter, Alice relents. “Very well, show me the drafts. I’ll sign them and then we really must be on our way!”

“Would Mister Hightopp like to wait in the lobby…?” Mister Phelps hints strongly.
“No, he wouldn’t,” Alice answers for him. The lobby is for boorish clients and pompous investors. The Hatter would surely go mad in such a proper place!

Once Alice is seated at her desk, frowning at a pile of cards and letters, and the office door has closed behind Mister Phelps, the Hatter twitters gleefully. “That man is in need of a pocket watch and longer ears!”

Alice considers her assistant and his uncanny likeness to a certain white rabbit. She snorts. “I’ll consider the pocket watch for his annual bonus, but the procurement of the ears, I’m afraid, is beyond me.”

Alice tries to deal with her correspondence as quickly as possible, knowing that even the novelties and oddities that clutter her office will not entertain the Hatter indefinitely. He plays with the meditation stones Alice had been given in China, admires the scimitar she’d purchased in Siam, taps his thimble-less fingers on the rawhide drums she’d discovered in Lagos…

When he begins idly spinning the world globe on its axis with idle flicks of his wrist, Alice signs the last letter and, shuffling the papers together into a mess that will surely take Mister Phelps an hour to sort out, she teases the Hatter, “Are you as frightfully bored as you look, sir?”

“Not if you’re about to suggest another cup of tea.” His smile is spectacularly hopeful.

“Hm…” she replies, grinning. “Not tea, but…” Here she pauses to open her desk drawer and do a bit of noisy rummaging. “But something that I hope is equally stimulating.”

The Hatter’s brows rise. A lascivious gleam enters his eyes. Alice chuckles and holds up a key for his inspection. His burgeoning smile flips into a thoughtful frown and he tilts his head to the side in silent inquiry.

Maintaining the mystery a bit longer, Alice merely rises and collects her satchel. “Your arm, please, sir,” she says, approaching him. “I require your services as an escort.”

“It would appear,” the Hatter says, hesitating before opening the door, “that you will also require the services of a Bandersnatch.” He nods in the direction of the lobby and Alice’s very Nivens-like assistant. “To clear the way.”

“Hah,” she declares softly. In a conspiring whisper, she explains, “I am my own Bandersnatch! Watch this, sir.”

“And is it also safe to smell?”

She giggles. “Yes. Quite. At least until we get outside…”

With a nod of agreement, the Hatter opens the door and Alice bustles through, already speaking. “Now I’ve taken care of those signatures and such Mister Phelps. I believe you’ll find everything on my desk as per usual—” Alice is midway through the lobby of the office now and Mister Phelps has just stood up from his desk out of courtesy. “I’ll be back tomorrow at my regular time and we shall go over any questions you might have about the changes I made to your drafts.” She places her hand on the door handle and concludes, “Please hold my messages while I’m out and appraise any visitors of the fact that I will return their calls by the day after tomorrow at the latest!”

And they’re out the door before Phelps can get a word in edgewise.

“Alice,” the Hatter lisps through his yellow handkerchief.

“Yes?” she prompts, turning them in the direction of her townhouse.
He giggles. “That was champion.”

Her own laugh is smothered by her handkerchief. They retrace their steps past the teashop until they arrive at the long-closed men’s boutique. The Hatter watches Alice curiously as she reaches into her jacket pocket and removes the key she had briefly introduced to him back in her office. With a wink, she fits it into the lock and the Hatter gestures his willingness to assist her. She steps back and he shoulders open the stuck door, lurching inside.

They each study the contents of the room (which is chiefly dust and old newspapers) before the Hatter seems compelled to investigate. Watching him peep into screechy bureau drawers and fiddle with the unoiled latch on the nearest wardrobe, Alice says, “When the tailor retired, I took up his lease.”

“His lease? Whatever for?” he mutters, opening a set of wardrobe doors which protest the disturbance with a grating squeal.

“I’m not entirely sure,” she admits. “But this shop is mine for the next seven months. As you can see, I’ve done nothing with it.”

“Shame on you, Alice, for abandoning these wardrobes to such an empty existence.”

She glances at the interior of the wardrobe that the Hatter had opened and spies nothing but itemless shelves. “I know. I’m a horrid proprietress. But really, I wouldn’t even know what to do with this shop even if it were tidied up…”

“Why, you would tend to custom, of course!” the Hatter lectures. “The looking glasses there are for final fittings, you see. The mannequins over there look dreadfully uncomfortable in their state of undress. They’d be rather smart in the large window there, were they clothed. And, oh! Hat stands!”

Alice watches as he inspects them with increasing enthusiasm, unmindful of the clouds of dust he stirs up.

“This could be a very grand shop, Alice,” he decides, “why, it would only take a bit of stock and —”

“A key.”

“—a rather lot of undust-ing to… I beg your pardon?”

Smiling, Alice cradles the Hatter’s hand in her own and deposits the key into his palm. At last, the ideas that have been blossoming over the last few days come to fruition. She thinks again about each of them: what sort of hat the Hatter might make for her, how he might use his savvy and cunning to his advantage in business, what sort of fantastically coordinated fashions he might produce, and how he might enjoy crafting masterpieces from the fabrics she had collected overseas. “The shop is yours if you want it.”

He gapes. He swallows. He stammers, “But… I… you…”

“Would be proud to order hats or dresses or any of your creations, Hatter. This town needs color and imagination and, yes, a bit of madness. And you will need a means of income and an occupation until we are able to go back to Underland.” Not because she is requiring it of him, of course. Alice would be happy to provide for him, but, were she in his place, that would not please her for long. “You needn’t agree to this, of course,” Alice deliberately reminds him, gesturing to the looking glasses and empty wardrobes. “It was only a thought I had.”
She surveys the dim and dusty interior of the shop once more and then, turning back to his gob smacked expression, says invitingly, “What do you say?”

*~*~*~*~*

In the end, it had been what the Hatter had not said that had conveyed his response. First there had been the choked giggle, then the twitchy brows, and finally, Alice had found herself with an armful of rather vigorously happy hatter.

The kiss had been quite nice, too. Overwhelming. Alice had given up on participating rather quickly and concentrated on hanging onto his shoulders. Had there been curtains covering the front windows, she suspects there would have been more dust than passersby being disturbed by his ardor. Alas. The Hatter had ignored everything other than her. He had beamed his joy.

“Do you really think I can do this, Alice? I cannot even manage this mirror-speak everyone uses here and…”

Alice had pressed a single finger to his dark lips and whispered, “It just so happens, I’ve had a thought about that…”

A thought that she hopes will work because she hasn’t another. Alice sighs as she consults her satchel and vanity in order to collect the items they will need and then returns to the ground floor of her house-in-town. The Hatter sits at the writing desk in the study, watching her nervously as she enters the room.

“I’m afraid I cannot address the issue of your speech pattern, Hatter,” she apologizes. “Because you sound all right-to-left to me. But writing… perhaps I can assist you with that.”

The Hatter holds onto her chair as she takes her seat beside the writing desk. He tentatively ventures, “Why do you suppose that is? That you understand me quite clearly, but cannot read what I write?”

Alice sighs. “I’ve several thoughts on that, but I am not sure if they are all connected or merely circumstantial.” She reiterates the possible interpretation of the phrase “the Queen’s English” and then does her best to describe a hazy memory of receiving a history lesson from a very large, very sad turtle. “And something about how lessons lessen with each passing day…?”

“Did you take lessons in Underland?” the Hatter asks.

Alice shakes her head. “Perhaps that is why I cannot read your writing properly. So.” At this point, she lays a brown leather folio on the table in front of him. “Let’s address that first. At least for the sake of correspondence issues.”

With a nod to the case, she prompts him to open it, which he does but from left to right, rather than right to left. He studies the items inside: a fountain pen (secured in its leather holster) and a sheaf of parchment on the right and, on the left, a looking glass nearly the same size as the folio itself.

“Now, my skill with a needle and thread is very poor,” Alice warns him. It had taken her nearly ten minutes upstairs to manage securing the mirror to the inside of leather-encased cover. “So we shall have to devise a better way to secure the looking glass in place. These bits of thread won’t hold the corners for long.”

“Never mind, never mind,” the Hatter says absently. “I shall take care of that… I believe… yes, this is to help me write in the manner here, is it not?”
“Yes, it rather presupposes you use that hand, there,” she says, pointing to what she would call his right hand, but which the Hatter clearly believes is his left. “But we can reverse the arrangement in the folio if you prefer.”

After a bit of fiddling, the folio is adjusted. The Hatter holds the fountain pen in his left hand, the tip poised over the paper. “Now, write my name,” she suggests in response to his blank look of expectation.

He does so and it is perfectly reversed in the mirror on the inside cover of the folio. “Excellent. Now, Hatter, watch yourself write my name in the mirror.”

“And I should write it as I would read it?” he checks.

“Yes. With a bit of practice, the print on the page should be legible to me and other people here while it is legible to you in the looking glass.”

“Legibly ledger-ed,” he mutters with a small grin. Alice rubs his shoulder and helps him hold the folio steady as he tries, again and again, to write Alice’s name using the reflection in the mirror rather than the sight of his own hand on the paper to guide him. After nearly three-quarters of an hour, the Hatter manages to write not only Alice’s name, but his own, the address of the townhouse, and the address of the shop passably well.

“Wonderful, darling,” she praises him on a whisper which she delivers directly to his ear. He leans back in his chair with a sigh and Alice presses her cheek to his shoulder, considering the pages of scribbles scattered around them. “I realize it’s not a true solution, but perhaps it will help until we can find a way to…”

“Alice, ‘tis fine. Even if I cannae…” He wraps an arm around her shoulders. “Mayhap, if I cannae change, perhaps this London place will suit itself to me.”

With the Hatter’s boyish charm, she doesn’t doubt that he is fully capable of convincing even the stodgiest miser to do so. But it will take time. “Of course.” Still, she considers hiring a boy to run the shop. Someone who would be willing to learn the Hatter’s mirror-speech, someone who could translate the requests from the customers… or at least write them down so that the Hatter might read them in a looking glass…

Over dinner, Alice asks him how he feels about taking on an apprentice or hiring a young man to liaise with the custom.

“It will save Time,” the Hatter concludes after a few spoonfuls of soup. “And I suppose I really ought to start making amends with the fellow.”

Taking on a translator is only one option, Alice knows, and it may not be feasible in the long run. But, if that is the case, she and the Hatter will adapt. There are many solutions to the problem facing them. That is the most important thing to keep in mind: they have options, plural.

Thus far, the Hatter has not seemed overly frustrated or perturbed by his inability to make himself understood or to understand the Uplanders to whom Alice has introduced him. In fact, on at least one occasion, he had turned that obstacle to his advantage! For bravery and strength of character of that magnitude, the man ought to be properly rewarded.

At the conclusion of dinner, Alice thanks Marta and shows the Hatter upstairs. “This is the guest bedroom,” she tells him. “And although you are not my guest, you are welcome to use it.”

“And if the use I find for it is contrary to its intended function?” he murmurs with a twinge of uncertainty.
“Then I’d rather you not lose sleep over it alone.” And then she shows him to her room, where he stays for the rest of the night… and every night thereafter.

Alice’s return to work is exceptionally busy. Once, she would have thrown herself into her duties to the company, but now she has a reason to hold back, to manage her time, to leave the office shortly after closing time and stop by at the slowly evolving shop down the street. The Hatter had hired two young men himself, without Alice’s intervention or assistance, proving that he is more than capable of functioning despite the language barrier that clings to him like fearsome feathers to a Jubjub.

The boys pick up the gist of the Hatter’s speech pattern quickly and Alice tests their penmanship. She also visits their parents to assure them that their sons are legitimately employed. Additional (and domestically produced) fabrics and notions are ordered (Alice finds herself assisting the boys – Robert and Edgar – with this when they cannot understand the Hatter’s lecture-some explanation of each material and the Hatter himself is rather too busy to write a reverse-worded essay for them) and the shop is cleaned and polished and furnished.

It is on that day, almost a week since Alice had brought the Hatter to London, that she finds an occasion to give him something which she had commissioned on his behalf shortly upon their arrival.

“What’s this?” he asks when she places the wooden box on his lap. They have just gotten ready for bed (and Marta has no doubt resigned herself to knowing that her employer will be living in sin for yet another night). The Hatter is sitting under the covers and had been occupying himself with scribbling in his looking-glass-lined ledger until the presentation of the gift had interrupted him.

Alice grins. “It’s a box.”

“Cheeky, lad,” he reprimands her.

She simply grins wider and seats herself on the bed, facing him.

After a moment of silence and twitchy fingers, he dares, “This is for me, then?”

“Yes, one or two trifles I hope you will find useful.”

He sits up and puts the leather folio on the bureau beside the bed. And then, looking as if he expects the box to burn him upon contact, he flicks open the latch and lifts the lid. Inside, set into individually molded, velvet-lined beds, ten silver thimbles of varied sizes gleam.

For a long moment, he does not speak, merely stares.

“You needn’t use them all,” Alice ventures softly into the silence, “but I thought they might come in handy… I’ve rather missed seeing them on your fingers, honestly, and… Well, the shop is ready for wares, which you’ll begin making soon. Tomorrow, perhaps, and as I can’t give you a hand, I—”

“Alice?”

“Yes?”

The Hatter looks up, smiling. “Help me put them on.”

Sliding thimbles onto the tips of a man’s fingers should not be such a breath-shortening and blood-
quickening experience, but Alice finds that it rather is. When every finger has been capped, he leans forward, frames her face in his hands and kisses her slowly, warmly.

Pulling back, he requests, “Nauw take ‘em off mae, lad.” She does, but she leaves three right where they are: the one on his right middle finger, his left thumb, and his left ring finger.

The Hatter brushes his cheek against hers, pressing forward until he can whisper in her ear. “An’ nauw ye.”

Alice frowns briefly, draws in a breath with which to point out that she is not wearing any thimbles… And then her breath catches in tandem with her comprehension of his meaning. Leaning back and looking into his eyes, she lifts her hands to her dressing gown and begins to disrobe. When her clothing is a pile on the floor, she assists the Hatter with his.

He shrugs out of his nightshirt, one white shoulder at a time, and lifts his hips to permit her to remove his nightwear completely, and then he opens his arms and invites her closer. He does not thank her for saving Underland from the Red Queen’s tyranny. He does not thank her for saving his fingertips from the needle. Her hands smooth over the scars on his chest.

“Look after me, now,” she whispers as their skin comes together.

“Aye, ’twill be yer pleasure, laddie…”

And it is.
The news had spread as news tends to do: quickly. Of course.

“Who is this new fellow down the street, Miss Kingsleigh?” one of the board members asks in a falsely idle tone. The company’s first bimonthly meeting in which Alice has been in attendance since her return has just concluded and already there is gossip to be dealt with! “The one you’ve leased that shop to?” The one who accompanies you home every night and escorts you to your office every morning, he doesn’t say.

It doesn’t matter; Alice can read the words in his eyes, hear them in his tone. She grins, “That, sir, is Tarrant Hightopp, and you are cordially invited to the grand reception which will be held in conjunction with the opening of his store for business.”

“A grand opening? A reception?” the Hatter fairly squeaks with excitement later that evening when she confesses to the existence of the event. Alice had fabricated it on the spot in order to forestall judgmental nonsense and is rather surprised by the Hatter’s obvious enthusiasm for it. “Marvelous!” he exclaims. “Why, we’ll model the old and new, toss scones and launch teacups, there will be bread and butter and cake—!”

“Hatter!” Alice calls softly, wrapping her arms around his waist as he lurches toward the writing desk, his fingers grasping for his ledger.

“I shall have to pen the Thank You notes personally!”

“The invitations,” she reminds him.

“Hm? Oh, yes, yes. Those as well.”

Sighing she lets him get on with it. She composes the guest list, including Hamish and William and James (and yes, even Lady Ascot!) and begins addressing the envelopes as the Hatter scribbles away in a flurry of energy beside her at the writing desk.

When she decides that her fingers would like a break from addressing one address after another, Alice collects one of the still-drying cards and reads the Hatter’s no-longer-shaky-or-oddly-slanted handwriting:

Dear Mister Bower,

Although we have not yet met, Miss Alice Kingsleigh assures me that you are a man of discriminating and adventuresome tastes.

“But, Hatter,” she protests, gently fanning the card in the air. “I haven’t assured you that Mister Bower has discriminating and adventuresome tastes.”

The Hatter pauses in the middle of composing the next invitation and looks up. “And what would you say if I were to ask you about the man’s character? Would you have assured me that he is an interesting gentleman, deserving of an invitation?”

“Well, yes…”

Seeming quite satisfied with this response, he concludes, “So, as I would only ever invite people with discriminating and adventuresome tastes to our event, he must possess those qualities!”
She sighs out a laugh. “Hatter, I adore your logic,” she informs him and returns to the note in her hand.

Forthwith, I would like to take this opportunity to extend a most cordial invitation to you concerning the grand reception celebrating the achievements brought about by a union between Miss Kingsleigh and myself. Festivities will take place at the following establishment.

Alice chuckles as his clearly enthusiastic phrasing. Goodness, if his excitement is so blatant when it comes to a shop opening, one could be forgiven for wondering if he might explode from joy were he planning his own wedding reception!

She scans the invitation once more and, this time, she frowns. “Hatter,” she interrupts him again. And again, he promptly lifts his pen and turns toward her.

“Yes, Alice?”

“You haven’t given the name of the shop.”

He considers the invitation in her hand briefly. “No, I haven’t, have I?”

She waits a moment for him to explain that but he merely looks at her. Finally, she presses, “Have you decided yet what you will call it? Your shop?”

He smiles. “Wonderland.”

“Wonderland?” she echoes through a wide smile.

“Yes, it’s the only name appropriate under the circumstances,” he says cryptically.

Alice, being quite used to nearly understanding his brilliant ideas, ignores the fact that she doesn’t catch all his meaning. Instead, she focuses on her love for the idea itself. “Brilliant, wonderful, and mad,” she approves.

The Hatter shares her smile, then leans forward to steal a kiss.

It is that evening, as Alice assists the Hatter with the invitations, that she realizes for the first time that she is surprisingly happy here, in London. She had never expected this place, which is so utterly normal and predictable, to be so full of excitement and adventure. Oh, there are no jabberwockies, true. But there are other challenges ahead of them. Ones that are thrilling rather than frightening. Alice could get quite used to these sorts of exploits. She marvels; her world has been made into something more than it had been just a few weeks ago by the Hatter’s mere presence in it.

And then she thinks of Underland and all of her friends there who have, quite possibly, been lost. How much of what she had fought the Red Queen for still remains? Does she want to know? It will break her heart to learn that the Windmill House has been crushed under the weight of water or that the pearly balcony upon which she had considered the moon with the Hatter beside her is slimy with water plants and algae and her friends themselves…!

She cannot bear to contemplate it, so she doesn’t.

But the fate of Underland is not the only worrisome point to intrude upon her incomparable happiness. There are also the letters. Her parting words to her sister had been a reminder to keep in touch and that is precisely what Margaret does. Although, given what she has to say, Alice rather wishes she wouldn’t keep in touch quite so often.
Alice, you’ve been so smart – a smarter woman than I – to avoid marriage and romantic entanglements. I regret now never broaching this topic with you. In my defense, I can only say that I assumed you understood the dangers inherent in such unions. Enjoy Mister Hightopp’s company if that is what you desire, but do so responsibly, dear sister! Or else you may find yourself as chained as I am…

Her sister means well, Alice knows. Truly, marriage had not been Margaret’s happily ever after. It had, in fact, turned into a nightmare. Alice respects her sister’s fears, but does not share them. She further understands that Margaret’s constant warnings of “whatever you do, don’t marry him!” are made not because she objects to the Hatter as a brother-in-law. No, her sister objects to the institution of marriage itself. Alice can hardly blame her: with an example like Lowell, is it any wonder that she lacks faith in matrimony?

What Alice finds more disturbing and grating than her sister’s smothering concern are the almost-daily invitations to teatime (and sometimes dinner) from her mother which are addressed to Alice… and only Alice. Helen’s insistence on excluding the Hatter from family gatherings despite knowing the nature of Alice’s attachment to him is far less confrontational than Margaret’s letter-bound lectures, but more damning.

All of these unwelcoming invitations, Alice burns in the stove at her office along with the letters from Margaret (once Alice has composed and sent a reply, of course) lest the Hatter see them. If he were to read Margaret’s letters (with the aid of a looking glass, naturally), he might take it as an attack upon his person and Alice would rather wear stockings every Sunday for the rest of her life than sour the burgeoning chummy acquaintance he’d struck up with her sister. But if he were to see proof of Helen’s constant snubs… Well, Alice would rather fight the Jabberwocky a second time and lose than see him disheartened now, after he has faced and overcome so much and with such inspiring cheer!

So, Alice replies to Margaret’s notes and Margaret’s notes only. She even informs the Hatter that her sister had written and wished him well. He happily gives her brief comments to pass on in exchange.

“Tell her that tomorrow shall be a day for all things with a peach hue. I can hear it in the air!” he says over dinner one evening and Alice promises to relay the message.

Replying to her sister’s letters is the only way she can cope with her mother’s constant invitations, to which Alice has neither thought of nor made an appropriate response. At least this way, she can speak to her mother through Margaret without causing a confrontation over her mother’s rather uncharitable mood, the evidence of which Alice endeavors to hide from her lover. Alice assumes that she has been successful in sheltering the Hatter from the carryings-on of her family until, one evening, he presents her with her mother’s latest invitation.

He places it on the writing desk in the study (at which Alice is seated) and takes half a step back, waiting for her reaction. Alice stares at the Kingsleigh stationary for a long, silent moment. Chewing her lip, she glances up and meets his stare.

“Will you answer this one, Alice?” he lisps gently.

Alice shifts guiltily. The Hatter does not remind her of their intent to return to Underland permanently. He does not remind her that travel between Underland and Upland is not easy. He doesn’t have to.

“I only attend mad tea parties,” she declares although the attempt at humor is weak. The words come out strangled and her smile is wobbly.
The Hatter looks from Alice to the invitation and back again. “Alice, even Tumtum trees would rather bend than break.” When Alice says nothing, he sighs softly and sinks into the seat beside hers. Their shoulders bump-and-brush and his warm, thimble-capped fingers curl around her left hand atop the desk. He murmurs, “Ye havenae answered a one o’ yer mam’s invitations, laddie.”

For a moment, she considers maintaining that this is the first one she has received… but no. The Hatter had already seen her resigned expression when he’d presented it to her. She had not seemed surprised enough then for her to justify such a claim now.

Alice studies the Hatter’s serious expression, his somberly green eyes and then sighs with acquiescence. Fine, all right; she’s been caught. Now what? She glances down at the envelope. For the first time in her life, she’s not sure what she ought to do with the thing.

She feels… lost. How can she possibly do what the Hatter suggests? How can she bend without breaking?

She looks up at him and flaps her free hand in a gesture for help. And help he does. The Hatter presses a kiss to her temple as he squeezes her fingers in his grasp. His grip is strong and his skin is a bit rough from the preparations he has been making in anticipation of the shop’s opening. The light from the gas lamps reflect off of the silver thimbles covering his fingertips; if they’d had eyes, Alice is sure they would have winked.

The Hatter reminds her, “You said that your mam only needs the opportunity to see in me what you do…”

Alice watches as he reaches across the desk and produces the guest list for the upcoming reception. He then places it squarely in front of her, for her to consider. And she does. Perhaps if she declines her mother’s invitation to tea (or perhaps it’s dinner this time), citing the demands on her time that the preparations for the grand opening require, and then if she hints that an invitation will soon follow…

Smiling, she reaches toward the Hatter and tugs him closer and into a proper kiss. “Crazy, mad, wonderful…” she mutters against his mouth, “man.”

He grins back with abundant delight and watches as Alice adds her mother and sister’s names to the guest list.

“When the time comes,” he asks, nuzzling her ear and tickling her neck until she squirms, “will ye stand wi’me an’ greet them?”

The words seem oddly – curiously – formal. But sometimes he is. She still hasn’t puzzled that out about him yet. Instead of asking, she responds in kind. “You can count on me, Tarrant Hightopp,” she vows.

Leaning back, he smiles softly. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

Studying his expression, Alice slowly shakes her head in wonder. “Why do you call me that?”

“What else would I call you?”

“You call me Alice,” she reminds him.

“When you call me Hatter,” he qualifies.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” she murmurs, shaking her head in amused befuddlement.
“Am I?” he asks, looking rather pleased with himself.

Laughing softly, Alice assures him, “You are.”

*~*~*~*

Suddenly, life seems busier, bigger, fuller than it ever has before. Alice splits her days, spending the mornings and early afternoons at her office and then rushing to the Hatter’s shop with a late lunch picked up from the teashop to assist him (and both Robert and Edgar) in whatever capacity she is able as they get ready for the opening. The Hatter works fastest by himself, of course, so, mostly the boys hand him the materials he requests and Alice tidies up in the wake of the ongoing activity. It’s exhausting… and she isn’t even doing anything!

One evening, two days before the event itself, Alice catches Edgar smiling at her inexplicably.

“What?” she demands of the capricious boy. “Have I a length of ribbon stuck to the sole of my shoe?”

“No, Miss Kingsleigh,” the young man says, his smile widening.

“Well? What is it?”

He hazel eyes glance in the direction of one of the wardrobes. “You’ll see.”

Alice studies the closed doors he’d indicated and oh she is curious, but no. Let it be the Hatter’s surprise. And, two days later. It is indeed.

“Shall I assist you with your wardrobe tonight, Miss Kingsleigh?” Marta asks a bit stuffily, not pausing in the task of clearing away the dinner dishes. The poor woman looks as if she is frantically trying to ignore the fact that her services as a lady’s maid have not been required since the Hatter had taken up residence. At the moment, he is absent: washing up in the necessary room and finishing his preparations for the evening. He had practically glowed at dinner. Alice doesn’t doubt that she is far more nervous than he is!

The newspapers had been notified of the event and, upon hearing of Mister Hightopp’s unique speech impediment, had insisted on a personal interview. The article had caused quite a sensation. Alice doesn’t doubt that his shop will be overrun with curious London Socialites from the moment he opens for business on the morrow!

Belatedly, Alice considers that she might have made a mistake in sharing him with London. Whenever will she find the time to simply be with him if he is swamped with work?

“Miss Kingsleigh?” Marta prompts her.

“Hm? Oh! I’m sorry. No, no thank you, Marta. I shall manage. Enjoy your evening.”

With a disapproving nod, the woman retires and Alice draws in a fortifying breath before heading upstairs. She takes each step slowly, deliberately, imagining the evening to come. There will be musicians performing and refreshments offered. There will be lords and ladies and other well-to-dos present. Alice doesn’t doubt that the Hatter will manage them all beautifully. Perhaps that is what is making her anxious. Perhaps she fears that he will not need her…

“Stop being a stupid girl, Alice,” she scolds herself and then almost laughs at the irony: no doubt, if London Society ever realizes her true relationship with Tarrant Hightopp, they would label her a stupid girl, indeed! Living – and sleeping in the same bed! – with a man who is not her husband! Scandalous!
Alice does not have any objections to being married to him. Her sister's mantra is not influencing her hesitance in this matter. Rather, it is Alice's hopes for Tarrant that have postponed any discussion concerning marriage. She would rather see him successful first, would rather have him discover who this London Hatter is by himself and for himself, before she becomes his public partner in all things. People will talk – as people are wont to do – but what will that say about him? That is Alice's chief concern. Will they tout him as 'that mad fellow who moved into town and starting turning us all on our heads!' or will they mutter, 'that odd husband of Alice Kingsleigh's never would have made a go of it in this town without her patronage'?

Perhaps the Hatter does not care what people say about him here. Perhaps he has never cared, not even in Underland. But Alice cares. She wants only the best for him and if she can provide this, she will.

Reaching the landing, Alice notes the light under the door to her bedroom. It feels strange knocking on her own door, but the occasion seems to demand it.

"Come in, Alice!" he calls.

Pushing open the door, the first thing Alice sees is him. He is standing before her looking glass in his new suit sans jacket. It is a creation of his own and one that Alice doesn't doubt has the potential to become very popular. His trousers, though long and straight, are a delightful wine-on-burgundy paisley print. His waistcoat is magnificently orange and the linen weave of it includes faint hints of magenta. His dress shirt is a rich, peacock blue and his cravat a satiny, emerald green with (Alice squints at it just to be sure, and yes, those are!) white rabbits printed at somewhat regular intervals. He fiddles with it as he watches her in the mirror's reflection.

"You," she says, coming up behind him and wrapping both arms around him so that she can investigate his waistcoat pockets, "look magnificently, majestically marvelous."

"Silly Alice," he scolds her with a grin stretched so wide with joy and pride it's a wonder he can speak at all! "You should only say such things to a king."

"Although I highly appreciate the prolific use of M's."

"I thought you might."

He winks and then glances over her shoulder toward the bed. Alice follows the twitch of his chin and gasps at the sight of the garments that had been laid out for her.

"You—this—!" She has no words, truly. The blouse is deep, royal blue with a pattern woven into the fabric itself. The vest is a caramel, golden brown, made interestingly dynamic by the variations in the threads of the fabric itself: some are pale yellow while others are nearly chocolate. And the skirt… No, wait. Not a skirt. This is…

"Did you use my sketches of Japan as a reference for these?" Alice asks, gently investigating the pleated folds to discover that, yes, they actually are trousers. Very full and wide-legged trousers, cut in the style worn by men in Japan. And what's more, they are a lovely dark brown. The creases, however, conceal glimpses of vibrant sky blue. She imagines how they will look when she moves, flashing slashes of summer sky…

"Everyone will adore you," she declares, her heart aching at the thought of seeing him exhausted from work night after night.

"You are sure?" he queries worriedly.

Alice blinks at him, startled. She cannot recall ever seeing or sensing this uncertainty in him
before and she can find no words to give him. In answer, she turns and embraces him in silence.
At once, his tension dissipates. She kisses his neck and smooths her cheek against his cravat,
which he had tied into a simple bow. He lifts his arms and rubs her back until she sighs happily
against his waistcoat.

“There’s more,” he informs her after the moment has been filled with the monotonous ticking of
the mantle clock.

“A jacket?” she questions, leaning back to view his expression.

He wiggles his bushy brows. “Better,” he promises. Alice cannot imagine it, so she doesn’t try.
She holds still as he fingers the buttons on her blouse. “May I?” he rasps.

She nods. This is not the first time that he has helped her undress. It will not be the last, but she is
suddenly overcome with fear. After tonight, he will not be her Hatter, will he? He will be a hatter
of London and…

“Be with me,” she breathes, shrugging out of her shift. The Hatter’s green eyes focus upon her
bare breasts.

“Alice…” he whispers, indecision making his moan long and thin.

She reaches for his hands and places them upon her. She shivers at the cool, metal kiss of his
ever-present thimbles against the swell of her breasts. “Please. Before the public has you, I
want…”

He glances up sharply and meets her gaze. “They’ll not have me. Only you.”

The promise makes her shiver, the feel of his trouser buttons giving way to her questing fingers
makes her smile, and the first thrust of his hips as he enters her makes her sigh. She braces herself
against the vanity tabletop, wraps her legs around his hips, pushes his trousers down his thighs as
he kneels on the padded bench and gives to her again and again. The bottles of perfume clink
against the sliver handles of her hair brushes but she closes her eyes and simply feels him and her
and them. She feels them, together.

“Hatter—!” she gasps as the cold, hard surface of his thimbled thumb presses deeply within her
flesh and rubs against her there. Precisely there!

He moans when she reaches the height of her pleasure. She gasps and holds onto his shoulders,
holds him steady when he buries his face in her neck and clutches her waist with his long fingers
and drives into her. And she takes him. She takes all that he gives.

And when he is still except for the dramatic expansion of his chest with each labored breath, Alice
thinks about his essence within her. Yes, she will keep that part of him with her tonight. It will
remind her that she is a fool to fear losing him. He is hers.

“Thank you,” she whispers against his orange hair, “for indulging me.”

He giggles and Alice smiles with him. But then he leans back and regards her with an expression
that steadily sobered. “E’rything is fine,” he assures her. “We’ll tend to our guests an’ make our
claims an’ then we’ll come home.”

“We?” she confirms shakily.

“We.”
And with a promise like that, how can she delay both of them any longer than she already has? The Hatter helps her off of the dresser, his brows rising when she refuses the handkerchief he hands her, and then his entire body seems to twitch when he realizes what that signifies.

“Alice…” he growls and then closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The gesture does not sufficiently calm him if the hot look he gives her is any indication. “Naughty.”

She supposes she is. “It’s one of my finer qualities,” she replies cheekily.

“Aye,” he agrees, catching her hand and placing nibbling kisses on the palm. “‘Tis.”

Dressing is far more entertaining that she had expected. She moves her arms and legs as requested, but mostly watches the Hatter’s enthusiasm manifest itself through his expression as his creation at last comes to life.

“Do you approve?” she asks unnecessarily, turning in a circle without being prompted. She has never worn a more comfortable (or more provocative) blouse. Rather than the high collars of recent fashion, this one plunges straight-and-narrow to her décolletage. The ruffled edging of the daring collar teases her bare skin. The lines of the vest hug her torso the way a corset would, but this option is a delight to wear. As she’d guessed, the pleats of her trouser skirt do flare and flash wonderfully with movement. She admires this effect in the looking glass for so long that the Hatter disappears without her even noticing… at least not until he is suddenly pinning a blue-on-buckskin top hat to her hair.

“Marvelous,” she pronounces, admiring the hat as he places a deep blue cape around her shoulders. The cape is a work of art, defying any and all words to describe it. It is far better than a jacket, she admits.

And then she turns and admires him. He has shrugged into his suit jacket, a magnificently tailed affair of emerald and indigo embroidery on violet. That particular combination shouldn’t have looked so marvelous, but it undeniably does.

“You’ve a new hat,” she observes, examining the remarkable example of a chestnut brown (utterly un-burnt, not-singed and non-scuffed) top hat. The assortment of colors interspersed throughout by way of the band and pins make it just outrageous enough to compete with his gravity-defying hair. Meeting his slightly anxious gaze, she delivers her verdict, “I like it!”

The Hatter snorts with humor. He places his hands on her waist, pointedly admires both her and the fact that she is wearing garments that he had tailored just for her. After a long moment, he takes a step closer, fitting his knee between hers, and glances up at her through his wild brows. She does not ask him if he is thinking the same thoughts she is thinking – her thoughts are mainly composed of memories of the rather indescribable experience of abusing her dresser and vanity mirror. No, she does not ask him. But she fully intends to take a survey on it before the night is over.

“Are we late enough yet?” he whispers suddenly.

Alice sputters on a laugh. “Fashionably so,” she agrees.

When they arrive, Robert and Edgar look positively delightful in their Hightopp-made suits. They also look positively relieved to see the both of them. “The guests are already here!” Edgar chides them. “You’re late!” Robert declares.

The Hatter brazenly takes Alice’s hand and grins. With that gesture, Alice thinks of James – she had told him that her tardiness is communicable through hand-to-hand contact – and upon entering
the shop, she sees not only him, but his brother as well. William is resplendent in a black satin top hat, very classical and stylish. (“What a dashing gentleman you are!” Alice praises.) James is modeling headwear that the Hatter had clearly intended just for him; the bowler hat is an imaginative green with a fanciful band and a cheeky feather. (“You would make a Cheshire Cat jealous with that style, Jamie!” she compliments.)

Alice is both charmed and surprised by the fact that the Hatter holds her hand in his very tightly and blatantly, not releasing it even to shake hands with the guests (which he accomplishes rather dexterously with his free left hand). The initial shock of the gaffe melts into amusement and then curiosity as he speaks to the guests one-by-one and Alice translates.

“Thank you so very much for coming, Lord Throngate. Truly, it is an honor.”

“The pleasure is ours, Madam Winchester.”

“Mister Bower, how marvelous of you to join us in celebration!”

“Lady Ascot! We’ve a hat just for you!” And, shockingly enough, after a bit of doubt-tainted sniffs, the woman deigns to glance at it… and is won over at first sight.

Their circuit of the room eventually brings them to Lord Ascot. The Hatter greets him with even more cheerful enthusiasm than the others and then, in a quiet aside to Alice, says, “I regret that I must attend to some things. I shall return in but a moment.”

“Have you been waiting a terribly long time?” Alice asks Hamish as the Hatter confers with Robert and Edgar, no doubt in order to convey some additional instructions.

The current Lord Ascot grins ruefully. “I have known you for years, Alice. You would be late to your own wedding.” She has no answer to that, merely an apologetic grin. Hamish sniffs and admits, “We were the first to arrive.”

And intentionally, she doesn’t doubt. Hamish had looked after the guests in her and the Hatter’s stead. “Thank you, Hamish. Your forethought and forbearance are much appreciated.”

“Humph,” he grunts. An instant later his expression softens. “To be perfectly honest, I got quite a bit of business accomplished. I would appreciate it if you were late more often.”

Alice enjoys that comment for a moment before Hamish sets aside his beverage and holds out his hand. “Here now, Alice, let’s have a look at this masterpiece you’re wearing.”

She models the ensemble with playful flair and, as she does so, catches sight of Lady Ascot, wearing her new Hightopp hat, and smiling. The gentleman at her elbow – none other than Mister Bower – looks thoroughly charmed. “Dear dodo birds,” she mutters, flabbergasted.

Hamish, noticing the direction of her gaze, glowers. “I shall hold you personally responsible if my driveway becomes a jam of traffic due to the gentlemen callers, Alice.”

“Would you be all right with that? Your mother and… someone new?”

He smiles at her with exasperation, “Alice… truly, you cannot see the forest for the trees at times. I was sure that inviting you to the manor for long walks and such would rile her into going out.”

She snorts. “Oh, Hamish. I could have told you that would never work!”

He nods. When faced with the success of a plan not his own, what more can he do?
Still watching Lady Ascot bewitch Mister Bower, Alice says to Hamish with a triumphant grin. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

He sighs. “When aren’t you?” Hamish replies with a rare smile. He then offers his arm, clearly intending to escort her back to the Hatter’s side. “It looks like high time you rescued him from Lord Rathbury.”

Knowing how much the man in question loves to listen to the sound of his own voice, Alice gladly accepts his assistance.

As the night wears on, the shop is filled to near bursting. To Alice, it seems as if every invitation had been answered favorably and the individual invited had brought as many guests as he or she had felt just within the boundaries of propriety. Thanks to the rather tantalizing news article, no doubt. Oh, yes, Londoners are a curious lot. Alice has undeniable proof now that she isn’t the only one!

It is nearly ten o’clock when the door opens and Alice manages to glimpse (over a sea of magnificently hatted heads) her mother and sister hovering uncertainly on the threshold. Of course, it takes her and the Hatter (who has not released her hand once in the last hour; she fears this will undo all her good intentions about keeping her patronage of his shop out of common knowledge, but he looks so luminously happy that she can’t bring herself to protest) nearly fifteen minutes to make their way over to them.

“Welcome to Wonderland!” Alice practically sings as she leans forward to kiss each woman’s cheek in greeting.

“Good gracious, Alice! What in the world are you wearing?” Margaret exclaims.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” she bubbles, the atmosphere making her giddy. “I shall ask the Hatter to make an ensemble for you as well! It’s amazingly comfortable! What colors for Margaret, do you think, darling?” she asks him.

He is already considering the question if his clinically evaluating stare is anything to go by. “Mint, lavender and sage!” he declares with a decisive nod.

Margaret approves the selection once Alice repeats it for her benefit. Her sister then adds with playful sternness, “With a bit less plunge on the north side, if you don’t mind!” The retort is accompanied by the unmistakable twitching of lips that want nothing more than to a smile.

“Oh, pooh. You’re no fun at all, Magpie,” Alice teases. “Come along, mother. Lord Ascot is here and you haven’t seen either William or James in… what? A year? And that smiling lady over there is—”

“Lady Ascot?” Margaret wheezes.

“Yes! It’s amazing what a new hat can accomplish, isn’t it?”

And the Hatter’s creations do seem to be rather magical. He has something for each of the invited guests – a hat or a scarf or even an embroidered handbag – as well as those who had merely tagged along. The fine quality of the creations and the sheer quantity of them still leaves Alice breathless with awe.

“You made something for everyone?” she had murmured once she’d realized. She had leaned close to convey the message, whispering directly into his ear and bypassing the obstacle of the lively music.
“Of course, Alice. This is our reception and these are our guests!”

The customs of Underland never cease to amaze her. She would protest the cost of it except she herself has learned that things of exceptional quality are so appreciated in London that having one of a particularly fine item is never enough. No, these people will be future customers of the Hatter’s shop. They will be back every season for a new suit or hat or fan or cape. It is a daring but brilliant move to give away samples of the delights yet to be commissioned.

When the sounds of street traffic from the opera crowd begin to intrude upon the festivities, the guests finish their glasses of wine or brandy and, pair-by-pair bid their farewells. It is an exhausting hour of final chats and thank-you-once-again’s. Even Alice’s parting conversation with her mother and sister is rushed. Although Alice has been avoiding her mother’s invitations for weeks, she wishes she could have spoken to her more than briefly here tonight. Helen Kingsleigh’s kind greeting of “Congratulations, Mister Hightopp, on such a grand accomplishment” had been wonderful to hear, but not nearly enough… But there will be other opportunities, Alice is sure.

With a sigh, she squeezes the Hatter’s hand, which is still holding tightly to her own. “Today is now tomorrow,” she informs him and he giggles.

“True, but for some, tomorrow is already today.” He nods in the direction of the shop’s chaise lounge and Alice covers her mouth to stifle a laugh at the sight of William and James sprawled across it, fast asleep.

“Oh, dear…” She glances through the thinning crowd to Hamish, who appears to be deeply involved in a conversation with Lord Thorngate. Before she can consider whether or not to alert him to his sons’ state of exhaustion, more guests demand her attention as they state their intent to depart.

It is very, very tomorrow when Alice finds herself facing the very last guest remaining. “First to arrive, last to leave, Lord Ascot?” she teases him.

“I had to see it for myself,” he declares. And then he offers his hand to the Hatter, “Well done, Mister Hightopp. A very grand opening.”

As they clasp and then release hands, Alice cannot contain her triumph one moment longer. She announces with pomp and pride, “I was right! London adores you, Hatter!”

The Hatter allows Alice’s tugs on his jacket to bring him about to face her. Giving her his undivided attention, he queries worriedly, “And you? Do you as well, my Alice?”

She reaches for his hands and grasps one in each of hers. “I do,” she informs him, uncaring of Hamish’s immediate presence. No doubt Robert and Edgar are also listening in as they tidy up the room. “I already do, have always done, and shall never fail to do so from this moment henceforth.”

“And I, you, my Alice. I do, I have, I shall.” He leans forward to brush a chaste kiss to the corner of her mouth and then burrs in her ear, “Ye are mae one love, for ayeways.”

Alice leans on his hands for support. Her knees feel rather like chutney and her head like a wispy cloud caught in a high, dry wind and her heart like the ocean tide just before a storm. Really, in such a situation, there’s only one thing to do: smile through the tears, which she does… and rather spectacularly if the Hatter’s replying grin is any indication.

The sound of a throat being reluctantly cleared brings her back to herself. “I’m sorry Hamish.
That was ridiculously sentimental, I know.”

He sniffs. “Sentimental, yes. Ridiculous… no, I don’t believe so.” His reply is so startling that Alice glances at him… and then she tries not to study his expression too closely. Those are quite possibly tears in his eyes and if they are, she ought to leave them to him. This man knows what love is; he has felt it – been inundated by it – before. And he has lost it. Never has her heart ached more for him.

“Thank you, Lord Ascot,” the Hatter replies softly and reverently. Interestingly enough, Hamish nods in acceptance before Alice can translate.

“Dear lord,” she teases him, “you aren’t beginning to understand all this mirror-wise talk, are you?”

“Bloody hell, I just might be. I lay the blame squarely upon the brandy!”

Where it belongs, no doubt.

Alice butterfly-kisses William and James awake. Or rather, awake enough for their father to herd them out the door and into the waiting carriage. The Hatter orders Edgar to drop the plates he’s carrying and Robert to abandon the fetching of water buckets: cleaning is morning’s work! They lock up the store and see the boys home… and then the night – what remains of it – is theirs.

The house is dark when they arrive but Alice doesn’t bother to light the gas lamps on the first floor. Together, they head upstairs only, tonight, after the Hatter opens her bedroom door for her, he pauses on the threshold.

Alice does not notice his hesitance until she is halfway across the room. Finding herself alone, she pivots back toward the open door. She is sure that her confused frown is clearly understandable, but she feels compelled to ask, “Aren’t you coming to bed?”

He smiles sadly, “I’m afraid, under the circumstances, that I shall have to go to bed.”

“Go? Go where?”

He slides his gaze slowly in the direction of the guest room.

Alice returns to the doorway and reaches for his arm. “But you needn’t sleep in there!”

“I’m afraid I must. I’ve answered, but you haven’t yet asked, Alice.”

“Asked? I’m sure I… Never mind!” With a shake of her head to scatter the gathering doubt and uncertainty, she says, “Would you like to rest with me tonight?”

“Very much so.”

“In that case, you are very welcome to do so.”

With a gentle but regret-filled smile, he leans forward and presses a gentle kiss to her cheek. She leans into his touch and sighs as his careful fingers deftly remove the hatpin and lift the top hat from her head. Tucking them under one arm, he caresses her scalp with the other hand, massaging her hair loose from its fastenings. Once all the pins have been deposited into the hat, he presses his lips to her forehead and murmurs, “Shall I fetch Marta to assist you with your wardrobe, Alice?”

What?
She gapes at him. “No, I believe you can manage the fastenings and such just fine.”

“And I will look forward to that honor most impatiently, but I cannot, Alice. Not yet.”

“Not yet?” she echoes, shocked.

He gives her a brave and happy smile. “I have faith in ye, laddie,” he whispers. “An’ ye’re well worth waiting fer.”

“Hatter, as lovely as that is to hear—” And what a relief it is to hear it! “—there’s no need for us to spend the night apart.” She collects his free hand in hers. “Please, come inside,” she murmurs invitingly.

“It wouldn’t be proper,” he informs her, still smiling happily, as if her attempts at persuasion are encouraging. “Good night, Alice.”

He hands her the top hat, pecks her gently on the opposite cheek and then, turning on his heel, strides down the hall to the guest bedroom, not even pausing on the threshold of his room to bid her one more farewell. (Alice knows this because she is still frozen—gaping like a codfish who has suddenly found itself performing the function of ladies’ headwear—when the door closes.) Moments later, when her wits return to her, his door is still shut and she is still alone, standing uselessly in the doorway to her room.

What had just happened here? It is not proper for the Hatter to reside in her room tonight? Does that mean she must go to him? Well, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to try! In her thirty-and-some-odd years, Alice has learned when a display of pride is utterly unnecessary. This is most assuredly one of those times.

She sets the hat down on her bureau, turns up the gas lantern on the sideboard, and, in the midst of preparing a candle, finds something on her bedside table that had not been there before. She sets aside the candle and stares at the small square of white parchment lying in stark relief against the cherry wood.

It is an envelope.

Odd. Had the Hatter forgotten it here? But no, it is not in his character to be absentminded. If he had put it here, then he had undoubtedly meant for it to be found… and found by her.

The moment she picks it up, she knows this is not the same envelope that she’d found in his jacket pocket in the Room of Doors. This one is newer, crisper, and… is that the Hatter’s own watermark? From the stationary she had ordered for him shortly after their arrival in town? Yes, she believes it is.

Slowly, she turns it over in her hands, presses the flap open, and gently tugs out the card. Upon it, she reads two words. They had been written mirror-wise, although Alice does not need a mirror to decipher them:

King me.

That and no more.

Well.

Well!

Now what?
She stares at the inked instruction on the card and then sighs hotly. “Botheration!” she mutters. It is far too late at night and her brain is far too interested in catching up with its day’s rest for her to puzzle this out!

Alice hurriedly sorts out the candle and, clutching the card in her other hand, marches into the hall and down two doors to the guest room.

“Oh! Alice!” the Hatter declares upon responding to her soft knock. He is wearing only his shirtsleeves and trousers and Alice tries not to stare at his bare feet. “Ah, you received my note.” He looks utterly delighted… and oddly expectant.

“I did,” she replies, taking a purposeful step toward him, crowding him. She expects him to give way, to invite her in.

He doesn’t. Curling his fingers around the door and the doorjamb – effectively blocking her path – he asks pleasantly, “Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Kingsleigh?”

Miss Kingsleigh!? Now that’s taking this strange game of his a bit too far!

“Do not call me that.”

“But it’s what you are,” he replies with a confused frown.

She cannot fathom his honest befuddlement. What in the world is going on here? Even her well-exercised imagination cannot sort through the clues. She holds up the card. “Does this have anything to do with your new sleeping arrangements?”

“No!” he whispers sharply with surprise. “It has everything to do with them!”

Alice surveys his expression as, for the first time, his brows twitch with worry.

“And just how am I to go about turning you into a king, Hatter?” she interrogates him. “I’m in no position to—”

The Hatter inquires, “You reached the eighth square, did you not?” When Alice merely stares at him, he reluctantly elaborates, “Over the last brook?”

Again, she merely waits for him to elaborate. He lets out a long breath, the anxious tilt of his brows collapsing into a frown. For a moment, he seems as lost and doubtful as Alice, but then his smile brightens. “It will be fine. Very fine,” he assures them both. “You will remember, Alice. The question will come to you!”

This time, he does not reach out to her, does not press kisses – not even chaste ones! – to her cheek. “Good night, Alice Kingsleigh,” he bids her warmly… and then he shuts the door.

*~*~*~*

The article in the next day’s morning news regarding the opening of Wonderland touts the Hatter’s inventiveness and charm. With praise like this, Alice doesn’t doubt that he’ll have his first commission before the remains from the party have been dealt with. However, she is far too confused to be excited for him.

“Good morning, Alice!” he bids her, joining her at the breakfast table. Looking up over the edge of the penny paper in her grasp, she watches as he bows rather formally and holds out his hand, palm up and waits. The weight of expectation hangs in the air and slows Alice’s response.
“Good morning, Hatter,” she tentatively replies, setting the news rag aside and placing her hand in his.

He smiles grandly and brushes his lips against her fingers, knuckles, and wrist. “I missed ye, laddie,” he murmurs with sudden urgency. “Has th’ question come teh ye?”

In silence, she shakes her head.

“Ah,” he observes sadly. Then he covers her hand with his and rubs her fingers between his palms, generating reassuring warmth from the friction. “But it will!” he declares with a brave smile. “Shall I pour your tea, your Majesty?”

“A rhyme,” she points out with a weak smile.

He giggles. “Purely coincidental!”

“Those are the Wittiest ones.”

“They are, indeed,” he agrees pleasantly as he dribbles cream and then sprinkles sugar into her cup before reaching for the teapot.

Remarkably, the Hatter is just as attentive and charming as he always is, despite having refused her the night before. Frankly, she is confounded by him and his strange request for her to “king” him… whatever that means!

Nothing will be gained by interrogating him or snubbing him, she knows. The most logical thing to do under these circumstances is to behave as normally as possible. She feels the rightness of this course of action deep in her very bones. She trusts the Hatter and that has not changed with this most recent conundrum. There is something he is trying to tell her. Something she must do. And she trusts him to lead her to the solution that he needs.

Although – as he bids her a good night that evening and shuts himself in the guest bedroom – Alice can’t help but wish that he’d go about assisting her with a bit more haste.

She lies in her bed that night and tries not to notice how unfortunately large, still, and cool it is. She feels like a stranger in it without the Hatter beside her and she finds herself huddling under the blankets as if she expects to be evicted from it at any moment.

The week is rather long, frustrating, and sleepless.

It is also rather exhilarating. Despite the undefined obstacle between herself and the Hatter as well as its seemingly unidentifiable solution, she can’t help but relish the pride she feels when she arrives at his shop at the end of her workday to see him bustling about as he gesticulates at his latest customer. Robert and Edgar translate when necessary but, as the week progresses, Alice notices an interesting trend: despite the Hatter’s inability to speak Queen Victoria’s English, his customers do understand the gist of what he means, more often than not.

How… interesting. She watches as, time and time again, the Hatter’s direct questions and comments and suggestions seem to be understood, but his muttering and occasional rants only confuse his clients. That is when Robert and Edgar step in and assure the lord or lady, sir or madam, mister or miss that the Hatter rather enjoys the simple (if slightly mad) pastime of thinking aloud.

“How…” he greets her after she has closed the door behind yet another satisfied customer, pulled the shade over the display window, and turned the key in the lock. The shop is officially closed for the day.
“Hatter,” she replies smiling. His joy is infectious and whatever troubles that exist between them cannot show themselves in the face of such energy and delight. He gathers her hands in his and brushes reverent kisses across her skin.

“How was your day, my Alice?”

“Two meetings were rescheduled, a visitor called unannounced, Sir Godfry continues to display the rather bad habit of undercounting zeros when it comes to paying for his order, and Mister Phelps had five distinct conniptions. I’m beginning to think I ought to arrange for the man’s ears to be lengthened. Aren’t they good for keeping one’s equilibrium?”

The Hatter giggles.

“Show me what you’ve been up to, darling,” she coaxes him and then winks to the boys who grin back. As the Hatter narrates his day, complete with a tour of partially completed projects, his assistants manage to finish cleaning and closing up the store. The three of them form a rather effective alliance, Alice thinks, when it comes to getting the Hatter to cross the threshold at the end of the day. And it is very important that the Hatter leave the shop on time, lest some particularly pushy and unforgivably late patron insist on being served.

Alice can’t bring herself to resent the success that Wonderland is enjoying. She had hoped for this, after all. She had hoped that the Hatter would be seen as his own man, with intrinsic worth in the eyes of Society before they see him as Alice’s. Inviting a reporter from the paper to the grand opening had been a good decision, she tells herself and hopes that business will slow down a bit once the novelty has worn off. She would rather prefer that he not spend all of his energies at work every day or else they could encounter a whole new and different set of technical difficulties once she has determined how to coax him back into her bed!

Three days after the article detailing the success of Wonderland’s grand opening is circulated in town, it is delivered to residents in the country. It is the day following this that Alice receives yet another invitation to tea from her mother. Opening it, she is disappointed to find that this one is also addressed solely to her. She had been sure that the Hatter’s success would open her mother’s mind to the possibility of… Well, if her mother had been honest when she’d claimed to be worried about the association damaging Alice’s hard-won reputation, but it seems as if… as if…

“Bugger all!” she hisses, slamming her open palm down on the card. Not only is she letting the Hatter down with her inability to “king” him, but she has let him down again with regards to her family’s acceptance of him!

Suddenly, that rabbit hole of Hamish’s is looking more appealing, despite it being a bubbling pit of muddy water.

“Alice?” the Hatter asks, peeking around the edge of the open door.

“Bloody hell, how did this all go so wrong!?” She expounds, gesturing angrily, “That reception was supposed to… supposed to…!” Well, she had intended for it to accomplish two very great and necessary things: it was to be the public unveiling the Hatter’s talent, which would have eventually led to their romantic relationship turning into something very permanent; the second (but not secondary!) goal of the reception had been to provide the reassurance her mother and sister require with regards to the Hatter’s character and potential… But now something is mysteriously broken between her and the Hatter and her mother continues to be unsolicitous toward him! How had she managed to fail on both fronts?

“Another blasted invitation,” she mutters, holding it up for him to see before tossing it aside and...
burying her hands in her hair. “I’m sorry, Hatter. Your name isn’t on this one, either.”

“That’s fine,” he cheerfully counters.

“No, it isn’t!” she nearly roars with frustration. “This is not fine! Damnation, Hatter, what was the point of the reception – of triumphing so spectacularly – if I’ve only lost!”

The silence is so complete that Alice is afraid to look up and confirm her suspicion that her foul temper has managed to push him out of the room completely. That is the very last thing she wants and yet that seems to be her pattern recently: the things she wants most are twisting inside out and upside down and she feels utterly helpless to fix them!

But, thankfully, this one thing does not transmogrify. She breathes a sigh of relief when the Hatter settles into the chair next to hers and gently untangles her grasping fingers from her hair. “Alice, my love… Alice,” he croons. “Ye are nae lost, laddie. I have ye.”

She stares as his thimble-capped fingers wrapped around hers. Yes, it rather looks like he has her. Perhaps it is she who does not have him? Just as she’d feared?

“Are you lost?” she croaks, the tightness in her throat choking her voice. “Lost to me? Has London found you? Pocketed you and made off?”

Mute and wide-eyed, he shakes his head.

“Hatter…” She sighs, despairs, and confesses, “I’m afraid. What if I can’t…? What if… my mother never…”

He presses a finger to her lips, shushing her. She blinks, startled, and into that moment of interruption, the Hatter speculates, “What if she sends an invitation addressed to me, asking me to join your family for tea on Sunday?”

“I… what?”

In silence, the Hatter removes a familiar-looking envelope from his coat pocket and lays it on the writing desk beside Alice’s invitation. She stares at the identical Kingsleigh family watermarks, the shop address that had been penned in her mother’s handwriting… and the Hatter’s name above it. With trembling fingers, she opens the card and reads:

Mister Tarrant Hightopp is cordially invited to an afternoon of tea and assorted refreshments at the Kingsleigh estate this Sunday afternoon from 4 o’clock.

Alice hiccups on a laugh. Her eyes sting with heated joy.

“’Twill be fine, laddie,” the Hatter sings softly, curling an arm around her shoulders. Alice presses her forehead to the patch of jacket fabric stretched over his shoulder and laughs from pure reaction. It is either laugh or cry and she will not cry if she can help it!

“Shall we reply to this one, my Alice?” he lisps softly. There is no trace of inquiry in his voice; he already knows what her answer will be. Faced with her mother’s tentative approval of their association, there can be only one response.

“No,” she informs him, “we shall reply to these.”

Smiling, he holds her close and pets her hair for many minutes… until Alice stirs and reaches for a pair of pens and the stack of stationary.
“I’m considering things that begin with the letter M…”

Alice glances up at the Hatter, ignoring the usual rattle and creaking of the carriage as they clamor down the country lane toward their destination. She is startled out of her thoughts of Battenberg and mirror-wise-spoken words and March hares by the beseeching quality of his expression and the urgent tone of his tone. For a long moment, she merely stares at him in relative silence.

“A meeting?” she inquires, thinking of the afternoon tea they will be attending shortly with her mother and sister.

The Hatter simply shakes his head and brushes his thumb over her captured hand. Sighing, he says, “Mayhap a monumental meeting. Many marvelous matters might be mentioned. A merger, a man and a monarch who is also a miss and might even now be a mother—!”

Inexplicably, Alice’s heart pounds at the words – so very many M-words! – and the pleading note in his voice.

He pulls himself up short and then performs a slight shake of his head to reorient himself. His gaze is bordering on frantic and his tone is strained as he requests, “King me, your Majesty.”

“I don’t know how,” she protests, irritated with herself. “Tell me, please. What do you want, Tarrant? What do you need from me?”

“I—”

“Hold there!”

Alice and the Hatter both startle as a masculine shout goes up somewhere outside. The coachman reins in the horses and the carriage clatters to a sudden and swaying stop.

“Have you seen a boy along this road?” the man calls out to the coachman.

Alice shares an inquisitive look with the Hatter and then, leaning across him, peeks out the window.

“Marshall?” she sputters, staring at the Ascots’ manservant astride a hastily tacked horse. “What on earth…?” And then, as she digests his frantic expression and sweaty brow, demands, “What has happened?”

“Miss Kingsleigh! It’s young Master James. He’s lost… or run off… or…!” The man pauses and forces himself to take a calming breath. “No one has seen him since he went off to play in the woods this morning!”

“What about William?”

“In bed, ill today. The poor fellow has caught a chill.”

Alice glances over her shoulder at the Hatter, who places a steadying hand on her waist. Returning her attention of Marshall, she demands, “Tell us what we can do to assist.”

Marshall directs her up to the main house and Mister Stilton, the driver, complies with haste, snapping the reins hard enough to startle the horse into an energetic trot.

“James is missing?” the Hatter confirms.
“Yes,” Alice replies, twisting the fabric of her Hatter-made trouser skirt in her hands.

“We will find him,” he counsels her, placing his hand atop hers and squeezing her fingers hard.

She lets out a sigh at the almost painful pressure; it distracts her very effectively from her building panic.

“Sooner rather than later,” she agrees. They will be late for tea with her mother and sister but Alice dares to predict that – once her family hears of the situation – their tardiness will be forgiven.

The Hatter throws open the door of the carriage even before it has lurched to a halt on the drive. “Where is Lord Ascot?” Alice demands, only halfway out of the vehicle. The Hatter’s strong hand on her upper arm keeps her from tumbling from the cab and landing squarely (or would it be roundly?) on her face in the gravel. “Lady Ascot!” she shouts, spying the woman standing on the steps of the grand house with the door gaping open behind her, wringing a handkerchief in her hands. Her greying red hair is frazzled and her mouth pinched with stress. She startles at the sound of her own name.

“Alice!” she exclaims, rushing to greet her.

“Have you found him yet?” she asks, placing her hands on the woman’s shoulders to steady her.

The lady of the house shakes her head. “No! I’ve looked all through the house. We’ve checked the gardens and the lake and—and—!”

Alice suddenly finds herself with an armful of hysterical Lady Ascot.

“Where are they searching now? Where’s Hamish?” Alice asks firmly, sure that the two locations are one in the same.

“Everyone is in the woods, checking along the riding trails,” she manages through her hiccups. “Oh, if only I’d listened closer this morning! He told me… Oh, but it simply can’t be right!”

“What did he tell you?” Alice insists.

Lady Ascot takes a deep, centering breath and says, “He wanted to visit some pit or other. Bubbling pit, I think he said, but we have no such feature on the estate! I must have heard incorrectly!”

But Alice doesn’t think so. She glances to the Hatter, her eyes too-wide with fright and disbelief. He stares back, clearly frustrated by his inability to understand Lady Ascot’s mumblings. There is no time for Alice to marvel why he seems to be able to impart his meaning to others, but is unable to comprehend theirs.

Alice signals a maid to step forward. “It’ll be all right,” she reassures James’ grandmother. “Now, this is what I need you to do. Are you listening, madam?”

She nods.

“I need to take a deep breath… very good. Now, send someone for Marshall. There’s no use searching the road. The Hatter and I will go down the Walnut Trail. You know the one? With the walnut grove at the end? Send Marshall after us. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, I… yes.”

“Good.” And with that, Alice hands the woman over to the hovering maid, grabs the Hatter’s
elbow and dashes across the lawn. As they enter the forest, Alice explains between panting breaths, “James. Bubbling pit.”

“Underland…” he concludes incredulously.

“I know! How on earth—he thinks he can—through frothing mud—!” Truly, she is too incensed to bother forming a coherent sentence.

Oh, she should have known that one of the boys would find that blasted rabbit hole! And she should have guessed that James would be the one to investigate it! And if he has been missing since breakfast, hours ago…!

“Six hours,” she says suddenly, drawing the Hatter’s attention briefly as they race down the trail through the wood. “How much time is that in Underland?”

“That would depend,” he replies, “on the mood he’s in.”

“He? Time?” she checks.

“Naturally.”

Alice had spent three days in Underland when she’d returned as a young woman. Later, she had confessed to losing track of the time and had asked Margaret how long she’d been gone.

“About fifteen minutes,” her sister had said. And now James has been missing for six hours!?

“Panic later, Alice,” she mutters. They race around the final bend in the path before the old rabbit hole and…

Alice digs her heels into the hard-packed dirt and forest windfall. Here, before her is no bubbling pit. Nor is there a rabbit hole. It is a very small and very deep well of perfectly black water. The surface is so still that it reflects the leafy canopy above in crystal clear definition.

“No bubbles,” she murmurs.

“Not a one,” the Hatter agrees, stepping toward the edge of the grassy bank. For a long moment, he considers the water, frowning mightily.

The tree on Alice’s immediate left looks rather strong and sturdy. It invites her to lean on it as she loses her mind in despair and grief. Surely, the utter stillness of the pool means something! Something she does not want to acknowledge or even entertain the thought of!

“Tarrant…” she chokes out on a sob.

He does not look away from the water, but reaches out a hand to her. “Your Majesty,” he replies, gesturing her closer. “I believe James requires your assistance.”

Alice wastes an entire moment of her life – possibly of James’ life! – gaping at him, struggling to comprehend his inappropriately optimistic tone. And then she forcibly swallows her gathering tears and stumbles forward, hardly daring to hope that the Hatter might be indicating the boy is still somehow alive…

…and he is!

Standing over the surface of the dark water, the first thing she sees is not her own reflection or the Hatter’s but James’! Alice blinks at the sight of him and what she can see of a magnificently fine,
white room around him. He is sitting at a very fine table laden with generous platters of sweets and a marvelously fine tea service.

“James!” she calls, but his reflection does not respond. Well, of course it doesn’t! How silly of her to think it would! She gets down on her knees in the soggy grass and reaches out to the reflection on the water. “Just like a looking glass,” she thinks and the observation tickles her memory. Had she once had an encounter with a looking glass? Yes, that seems correct somehow… and had there been chess pieces? A railroad? Ham sandwiches and a Hatter and…

“There is a solution, I believe,” the Hatter remarks. “Through and through.”

“Through the looking glass…” she mumbles, still caught in that moment between dream and memory. And then she huffs out a breath. Those impressions will have to wait. There is a boy in need of rescue!

“Through and through,” Alice mutters, daringly pressing her hand against the surface of the water. She watches as – incredibly! – her hand emerges, perfectly dry, into the reflection itself. Tarrant takes her other hand, braces her safely on the bank as she stretches for James’ collar and… yes, just a bit more…! A bit more…!

Just as he reaches for a tart and then sits back in his chair, her fingers curl around his jacket.

Suddenly, the sensation of freezing water engulfs her arm. The tea table and sweets and the entire, opalescent room vanishes as the water ripples and sloshes. But James remains! She can see him now, just beneath the surface, flailing stupendously. Alice shoves aside her disbelief and struggles to pull him to safety. With a great heave from the Hatter, she lands on her back on the grass with a smaller but startlingly heavy, wet body slamming against her and knocking what breath she’d managed to hold onto out of her.

Despite the fact that her arms feel as if they may have been stretched halfway to the moon, she manages to throw them both around the coughing and sputtering and utterly drenched and shivering child.

“James!” she exhalles, hardly daring to believe her eyes and increasingly soaked clothing.

“Aunt Alice?” he wheezes.

The pool itself seems to answer. It bubbles noisily.

“Oh! Oh my…!” She clutches James to her and scoots away from the water’s edge. She manages only a few inches before the Hatter hooks his hands under her arms and half drags both her and her burden to a safe distance.

For a long moment, no one speaks. The Hatter sits down on his knees beside her and stares at James, who is still squirming and coughing. He looks up at Alice through his still-dripping hair and announces with delight: “Underland is real!”

Alice gawks at him for a moment before she manages to find her voice. “Yes, I know,” she responds inanely.

“Underland is real!” he repeats to the Hatter, grinning with excitement. “All the stories are real and the people and the animals…! Aunt Alice!” he virtually screams. “Animals can TALK!”

“Yes… I know.”

But having found his voice, it appears that it will take a great catastrophic occurrence for him to be
parted from it again. He gushes words, bubbles over with excitement, gesticulates with more animation than the still-bubbling pit of black water only a few feet away.

“At first, the Mock Turtle was really put out because he said I wasn’t an Alice but I said I had an Aunt Alice and she’s the best Alice there is and I’ve learned all about Underland from her and so he said he’d take me there and DID YOU KNOW THEY HAVE A CASTLE?!”

Alice blinks. “Er, yes…”

“And the white rabbit said it was lucky I arrived when I did because it was brillig and brillig is when they start boiling things for dinner and I climbed out of this big stewpot and that was scary, but there was a hare with a wooden spoon and he was cooking and—!”

Alice blindly reaches for the Hatter’s hand with her own, forgetting for the moment that he cannot understand a single one of James’ rushed and slurred words.

“And then,” James rambles on, his voice cracking under the strain, “I met Bayard and his family and they REALLY ARE BLOODHOUNDS, Aunt Alice! And they took me to see the White Queen but I had to be interviewed by the head of her guard who is THE DORMOUSE, Mallyumkun! And Chessur was there grinning and—!”

Alice can only clutch at Tarrant’s hand in silence as James expounds on each of their friends, who are no longer lost but found!

“The Tweedles argue JUST LIKE YOU SAID!”

“I saw a DODO BIRD!”

“Did you really slay the Jabberwocky? They have this biiliig picture of the battle in the throne room and—!”

Beside her, the Hatter seems to choke on his own breath.

“And they said you’re a queen, Aunt Alice! Queen Alice! Just like the White Queen, only they said you don’t have a color yet because you didn’t go back to the first square to see what was waiting for you.”

Alice has no response to that. She is rather busy remembering the Hatter’s remark last week when she had protested not being able to king him. “You reached the eighth square, did you not? Over the last brook?”

A looking glass… No! Through a looking glass and then the Red Queen had… and Alice had been sent to find the second square and… on a train and then a horse and a knight and…! Oh… Oh!

James wiggles on her lap, calling her attention back to his diatribe. “So, does that mean you’re gonna marry a prince or a king? Is that why you never married Father and—!”

Alice gapes at the waterlogged and mud-smeared child in front of her. He babbles on, but she cannot hear him. All of a sudden, it makes sense. It all makes sense!

“Tarrant?”

“Yes, your Majesty?”

King me, the instruction card had said. A businesswoman would never be able to accomplish
such a thing, but a queen would!

“Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Kingsleigh?”

“Do not call me that.”

“But it’s what you are…”

Alice Kingsleigh – King’s Lee! She looks up at the Hatter, stares. Yes, she has been protecting him since their arrival here, hasn’t she? He has stood in her lee when necessary and she had guarded him from the bluster and howling of Society.

King me, he had begged (and urgently at that!) and the only way a queen can king a man here, in Upland, is… well… to marry him.

“I’m considering things that begin with the letter M…”

“M…” she mouths, understanding his most recent hint at last. And what’s more, other things begin to make a strange sort of sense: their first intimacy, sharing a residence, hosting a reception throughout which he had held her hand tightly, the I-do-I-have-I-shall of their vows witnessed by Hamish and how the Hatter had been able to will others to understand him thereafter… and…!

The Hatter’s hands twitch and she remembers that his right and left hands are reversed here: he is mirror-wise here. Backward! Suppose a wedding were also conducted backwards! The consummation would be first, in that case, and then the single residence, and the wedding reception, and—!

“The reception,” she rasps, her hands tightening around James’ soggy jacket sleeves. The boy babbles on, unaware of her blossoming epiphany.

The reception and the vows and then, that night at their home, the Hatter had expected her to ask… Because she is the queen, after all, and only a queen can do the asking in such a situation and—!

“Oh, dearest Underland,” she mutters.

“Aunt Alice? Aunt ALICE!”

“Yes! Yes, yes, what is it?” she manages, forcing herself to focus, to listen to something other than the sound of the blood rushing through her veins and roaring in her ears.

“Did you pull me out of the White Queen’s castle?” James asks rather severely.

“I’m afraid I did.”

“That was very rude. We were in the middle of tea!”

Alice snorts with laughter that she fears is well on its way to becoming hysterical.

“MASTER JAMES!!”

Marshall’s bellow echoes through the forest, startling Alice who grasps the boy closer to her body. An instant later, the manservant rounds the bend in the trail and skids to a halt in the middle of the path. For a moment, he merely looks at Alice and the very drenched child on her lap, and then he lurches forward.
“Oh, praise be! Come along now, young sir!” There is a flurry of activity, of arms and legs and water droplets that fall rather predictably to the ground and then Alice finds herself looking up at Marshall who is clutching a very disgruntled boy in his arms.

“I can walk, Marshall!” James protests.

“Not as fast as I can carry you!” the servant argues back. “Your father is worrying himself into an early grave!”

“Aunt Alice!” James cries, reaching back for her as Marshall begins striding back the way he’d come, his charge clinging to him like a frog to a tree.

“We’ll be right behind you!” she manages, lifting one of her rubbery arms to wave.

And then, suddenly, she and the Hatter are alone. The bubbling of the water and the fading conversation between Marshall and James infringe on the silence, but neither is loud enough to distract her from what the Hatter says next.

“He went to Underland…”

“Yes, I know, he… Wait, you…?”

The Hatter beams, “Could understand every word he said, Alice. He speaks the White Queen’s English now, too. Just like you.”

Impossibly, the Hatter’s smile widens. “Underland is fine, Alice!” He reaches for her hands and pulls her tightly into his arms. “Mally and Thack and Chess and—!”

“They’re all fine,” she agrees, stupefied by the development.

“And the White Queen is… is… and you…!”

“Yes,” she breathes, finally understanding what she is, finally understanding what it is the Hatter needs from her.

King me.

Yes, she can do that. And once she has done it, he will speak the King’s English… and making oneself understood by any and all is one of the benefits of being a king, Alice suspects. As is being able to understand one’s subjects. If Alice is indeed something of a queen here as well, that is. Well, there’s really only one way to find out…

“A merger, a man and a monarch…”

This is the answer. The one obstacle that they have yet to overcome!

She lifts her hands to his face, stares into his wide eyes. His Adam’s apple bobs as the tension between them builds.

“Hatter… Tarrant,” he begins hesitantly.

“Yes, your Majesty?”

Alice draws in a steadying breath and then whispers, “Marry me?”

For a long moment, he simply studies her, his verdant green eyes moving this way and that, his dark lips twitching in counterpoint to his wild, orange brows.
“Have I found the question?” she whispers when the silence becomes too much.

“Aye,” he rasps. “Aye, ye have, my Alice. And aye, I have.”

“I am afraid,” she begins, a smile tugging at her lips with increasing strength as relief swells within her, “that our process is rather backwards here…”

“The end is the beginning?” he deduces.

“Quite. Do you mind? Marrying me for a second time?”

“I would be a lucky man indeed,” he burrs, his fingers tightening, curling and grasping her waist, “were I teh wed ye again and again, f’r th’ rest o’ auwr days.”

He leans close, their lips brush, and then…!

“There is the hole, my lord, just around that bend!”

Alice turns toward the commotion on the path. Oh, botheration. Of all the wretched timing!

With huff and a shared look, Alice struggles to stand up with the aid of the Hatter’s lithe strength. Just as she gains her feet (but before she releases his arm from her grip) Hamish blusters into view.

And bluster is well and truly the Word for it. His hair has been mused and arranged in tufts – no doubt by his own frantically pulling fingers – and his cravat is askew, his trouser legs muddy and his shirt snagged. Alice cringes away from imagining the Episode the poor man must have endured as he’d searched for his wayward son.

“Alice!” he sighs-shouts-hiccups with relief. “You found James. I can never thank—!”

“How is he?” she asks softly, forestalling the utterly unnecessary and inadequate words of thanks.

Hamish takes a deep breath and nods. Alice relieved that he doesn’t seem all that furious with his son. Still, Alice makes a note to speak with the boy before they leave. Hamish will not understand his son’s words about Underland. She will have to ask James to promise to keep his adventures a secret.

“James is very filthy, rather excitable, but otherwise fine.” He nods to the Hatter in greeting and in wordless thanks before turning his attention toward the bubbling pool. “This,” he declares, his lip curling with disgust, “is the true culprit here. James fell into it from what I gather. Nearly drowned. If not for your timely intervention…” He pauses, shudders, shakes his head and proclaims, “This blasted hole will be filled with gravel by the end of the day tomorrow!”

There is nothing Alice can say to sway him. She does not even try. Were it her child who had fallen into such a portal… well, she cannot deny that her actions might mirror his. Portal to Underland or no! All it would take is one instant when the gateway does not work and the traveler would perish. Now that she thinks about it, she realizes how very much danger she had been in when she had fallen down the rabbit hole herself! If not for the magic of Underland, she might have died!

Alice reaches for the Hatter’s hand and he clutches her fingers tightly. Once Hamish has finished cursing the pool and shouting orders for its eradication, the hullabaloo calms. Alice and the Hatter accept Hamish’s invitation to get cleaned up at the house and as they meander their way in that direction, Alice leans close to her lover, her husband, and – amazingly enough – her king.
“The pool permitting, we could return now,” she tells him, consoles him with her willingness to
go back to Underland, even by a route as risky as the pool, if that is what he wants. “I do not
know when the next chance will present itself…”

“I know,” he replies softly, placing one hand over hers, which is being carried in the crook of his
arm. And then, with a glance at her, he pauses on the trail. They are at the edge of the wood; the
house and their friends and family and their *life* in Upland lies just beyond.

Very deliberately, he gathers her hand in his, and then places it over his heart. Beneath her palm,
Alice feels the stiffness of paper on the other side of the fabric of his suit jacket. Slowly – and
with a glance at his expression as she does so – she slides her hand beneath his lapel, dips her
fingers into the inner pocket and removes the square of parchment within it. But no, it is not
parchment, not exactly. It is an envelope. An envelope with a Kingsleigh watermark and she
know what it contains: an invitation to join her family.

“We have a prior engagement,” he murmurs softly.

Alice smiles as she replaces the card and its sheathe in his hidden pocket. “You’re right,” she
answers, patting his suit jacket over his heart, concealing that vital piece of correspondence. “You
are right.” Underland, and their friends there, will have to wait a little while longer. And when
she and the Hatter finally *do* return, it will not be via the bubbling pool-that-had-been-a-rabbit-hole
on the Ascot estate. There must be another way and, one day, she and the Hatter will find it.

For a long moment, they stand in the shelter of the trees, ignoring the world beyond. And then the
Hatter burrs, “Are ye ready, mae Alice?”

“Yes,” she answers him, tightening her grip on his arm. “I am.”

And thus it happens that Alice Kingsleigh, who had always assumed that she would choose
Underland over Upland, finds herself rejoining the life that she has always known… only now –
with this remarkable man at her side – it is qualitatively *better*. 
Epilogue

Life continues as it has since the Hatter’s arrival and hopefully always will. There is a warm welcome waiting for them when they arrive, mostly clean, for tea with her mother and sister. There is a general uproar over James’ foolhardy stunt and then a shocked silence when the Hatter announces – in perfectly comprehensible English to all present – their engagement.

The wedding follows a mere month later. It is a small event, limited to only close family and friends… and a special guest of Lady Ascot’s. It thrills Alice to see the woman smile again, especially from under her Hightopp hat.

On the morning of the day in question, as Alice paces in the parlor waiting for the Hatter to exit the house (keeping to the tradition of not seeing the bride before the ceremony on the day of the wedding), she discovers a most unanticipated gift. There, in the far corner of the study, crouching in the shadows, is something both she and the Hatter had long given up hope of ever seeing again. She collects it and glances around the room, wondering where it had come from…

Her gaze alights on the looking glass over the mantle above the fireplace.

“Thank you,” she says. And perhaps it is merely her fanciful imagination that makes her see in its surface the figure of a woman in white, her crown glistening as she bows in response. A short hour later, when the priest concludes the ceremony, Alice holds up one finger to pause the proceedings. She then fetches the object from its hiding place among the pews in the chapel and presents it to her husband.

Beaming, he tilts his head toward her and Alice places his old top hat upon his head.

Lost… and found.

The kiss that follows is understandably spectacular. And the subsequent night they spend together even more so. The next morning, when Alice catches him talking to someone in the looking glass in the parlor, she merely steps up next to him, wraps her arm around his waist… and joins in the conversation.

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