### Alice and the Knav

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**Summary**

Alice and Jack are twins in the most fraternal way possible: they were born in different dimensions! They can meet in their dreams, but when Jack goes missing, Alice must find a way to get her whole body over to his world. Can a thieving rabbit show her the way?

**Notes**

Based in part on Lewis Carroll's Alice stories and ETA Hoffman's "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King", this work takes place between my stories "Nussknacker" and "A Conspiracy of Spirits", from *The Drosselmeier Chronicles: The Solstice Tales* -- it's strongly recommend that you read that collection first. This work is still in progress.
"We are never doing this again," Clara informed her not-so-beloved-at-the-moment mate, Nussknacker, with a tired growl.

Her vision swam. The leafy canopy and walls of her home were replaced by a plaster ceiling and leaf-patterned wallpaper. Nussknacker was traded for her godfather, Drosselmeier—or rather, one of his other identities: that of her physician, Raben. It was confusing on the best of days....

"Welcome back," Raben greeted her.

"It's not fair!" she complained. "I can't get a break!"

Normally if someone was in pain or exhausted and they managed to fall asleep, they'd get a reprieve from their miserable state. Most of the time, that held true for Clara, too, even though she was, in a way, always conscious. When Clara fell asleep in the Otherworld, she immediately woke up in what her godfather called Midgard, in her other life as Marie Drosselmeier. When Marie fell asleep, she immediately woke up as Clara. Trading bodies was usually as good as sleep, though, because the body she hopped into didn't share the physical condition of the other, and had gotten rest in her absence. But now ....

"Well, maybe next time you'll be careful not to be pregnant in both bodies at once!" he chided her.

Marie glared at him. The hair on Raben's left forearm was spontaneously singed off, startling a yelp out of the man.

Marie sweetly suggested, "Maybe next time you'll not goad a Fire-wielder who's pregnant twice over...."

"Is Nussknacker still in one piece?" Raben asked, his arm hair restoring itself in an instant. He looked amused, but she thought she saw genuine worry behind his smile.

She hadn't yet decided whether to assuage his fears or torment him, when another contraction struck. The walls faded, and the trees returned, along with Nussknacker -- and their elf and faerie companions, Yven and Maribelle.

"How goes it?" Nussknacker asked Clara pensively.

"I set Uncle on fire," she offered, relaxing her grip on the faerie-silk bedsheets as the contraction eased.

"That well?" he chuckled. He immediately grew somber. "Are you really sure--"

"Yes!" she hissed.

He'd been trying to get her to accept healing energy during the labour, to deaden the pain of childbirth, and she didn't want any more temptation. She wanted this experience. She wanted, when one or the other of her children inevitably upset her, to remember how much effort it had taken to bring them into the world; the greater the effort to get something, the easier it was to cherish it.

She almost reconsidered, though, when pain engulfed her once more. It didn't matter; even if she wanted to accept his offer, she couldn't form a coherent enough thought to tell him so. The world began to fade again--but this time, it overlapped the other as Midgard came into view, rather than
disappearing completely. Leaves stuck out of plaster, popped forth from the walls, and Raben's old face and Nussknacker's young one merged to form that of a middle-aged man. She would have laughed, if she wasn't so busy screaming in agony.

And suddenly, it was over; she stopped screaming--and someone else started.

"She's here!" a relieved Raben announced, heralding the arrival of her daughter, Alice Lily Dinah Drosselmeier. At the exact same moment, Nussknacker did the same, regarding their son, Jack Sebastian Von Walnussheim. (There had never been a question about the sex, for either child--a perk of her supernatural abilities giving her an uncanny knowledge of each child whenever she was in their respective mother's body.)

She suddenly realised that she wasn't hearing only one voice crying, but rather two--in perfect unison. She found her laughter then, and joy was a steady stream down her face. (Joy tasted a lot like salt.) Both howling children were placed in the arms of their mother(s), their faces melding much like Raben's and Nussknacker's had done.

"Hello, Alice," Marie said, at the same moment that Clara said, "Hello, Jack." She kissed both their brows simultaneously, and their cries eased.

"Do you think Alice will be born soon?" Nussknacker wondered, at the same moment that Raben asked, "Is Jack ready to pop yet?"

"Already done," both of her replied.

"...What? You had her without telling me? When did it happen?" Nussknacker asked, sounding quite wounded.

"Marie, my dear, why didn't you say so? How long ago was that?" Raben demanded.

"Just a moment ago! You could let a woman catch her breath first before expecting conversation!" she growled in two realities.

"You mean you bore Alice right before you had Jack? Goodness, and you weren't even over there very long!" Nussknacker noted, sounding impressed now.

Raben made pretty much the same observation, at nearly the same moment. "Oh, I do wish you would both stop chattering at once," she whinged.

"'Both'?" the men echoed. With their faces overlapping, she couldn't tell which of them was more perplexed.

Clara could see that her other companions, Yven and Maribelle, looked confused as well--probably because, from their perspective, only Nussknacker had been speaking, so Clara's complaint made no sense.

"Yes!" Clara-Marie snapped. "And to answer your question, I gave birth to both children at the same time!"

"The same time!" Nussknacker echoed, stepping back and falling into the chair beside the bed. He looked horrified.

Raben, though, looked manic, a terrifyingly excited light in his eyes. "Marie, are you saying that you're currently awake in both realms?"

She nodded, too tired to really care that what she was doing was remarkable.
Unfortunately, her companions hadn't had quite as exhausting of a day. "I-I don't understand," Nussknacker stammered. "How did you cross without falling asleep first? And how are you still here?"

All right, she had to admit, she was starting to wonder about that herself. "I have no idea." It wasn't like she'd tried to straddle the worlds.

"You have no idea if you're awake in both realms?" Raben scowled, apparently thinking she was responding to him.

Marie did not have the energy to deal with this. "Don't you have grandparents to announce a birth to?" she muttered.

"If I must," Raben sniffed.

"I assume you're talking to Uncle," Nussknacker reckoned as he handed Jack to Yven. "Tell him to hurry up--I want to meet my daughter!" And with that, Nussknacker suddenly slumped in his chair.

Clara-Marie smiled, knowing Marie could expect Erich any second now; doubtless, Nussknacker had fallen asleep because someone had shaken Erich awake in Midgard. Sure enough, Erich burst into Marie's room, with Alice's four grandparents, her Aunt Louise (Marie's elder sister, who had come all the way from her home in France to help Marie for the first month or so after the birth), and her Uncle Fritz (Marie's younger brother), trailing behind him.

**It's not fair--I want to see Alice!** Maribelle pouted.

"Clara and Nussknacker can show us in their thoughts," Yven pointed out.

**It's not the same as meeting her, though!** Maribelle protested.

"Well, when the child learns to walk in dreams, we'll meet her then," Yven soothed the little faerie.

**Walk in dreams?** Clara mind-spoke to them, so the mortals in her Midgardian family wouldn't hear Marie speaking and think her crazy.

**You know -- when you have a wakeful mind in the dream world...? Come to think of it, can you even dream anymore?** Maribelle asked.

"No--I stopped since coming here. I'm always either in Midgard or in the Summer Country."

"Well, have you ever tried to dream instead of going to one place or the other?" Yven asked.

**No...** she admitted. She hadn't thought it an option--and hadn't had a reason to try. But now...well, she was exhausted in both forms; if she could dream for a while, she could rest both bodies.

"Oh, darling, you look like death warmed over--why don't you sleep a bit?" Marie's mother suggested.

"You know, a nap would be really wonderful," Marie-Clara decided in both realms, adding, **I'm going to try to dream,** for the benefit of those who could hear mind-speech. Truth be told, she wasn't sure she had a choice, as her eyelids quickly drooped--all four of them.
One minute, she was in bed, straddling two dimensions with two perspectives, and the next, she was a singular entity again, standing in a stone corridor. She recognised the place as part of the toy castle Uncle Drosselmeier had made—the one she, as a doll, and Nussknacker had walked through to get to a mirror that was a gate to the Otherworld. She looked at her hands, and found they were flesh; she wasn’t a doll this time, at least. But then, how had she shrunk down to fit in the castle...?

She began walking to the castle gate. Along the way, she turned an unfamiliar corner and found a corridor filled with doors on both sides, each only a hand's-breadth apart from its neighbor. The hall stretched impossibly far out, details fading to nothing but a spot of light.

Water leaked from under the first door on the left; curious, she opened it. Initially, she thought maybe her Uncle Drosselmeier had installed glass in the doorway and filled the room beyond with fish. When she touched the glass, though, her hand passed through it; she pulled it back, and found her hand wet. Well, Yven did suggest I try to dream, she thought to herself. I guess I've succeeded--dreams are a mix of the familiar and the strange, as I recall.... It had been so long since she'd dreamed, though, she couldn't rightly remember.

Closing that door, she opened the one opposite it. This one led to a night sky--and no ground! She let out a squeak of fright as something whizzed past her nose too fast for her to tell what it was. Another object made her jump back, and struck the door behind her: a stone the size of her fist left a sizable dent. She hurriedly shut the door and scurried away, hoping nothing could break through any of the doors. The next door, despite being so close to the first, revealed not water, but a hot desert. Across the way was a sunny, heather-filled meadow. She almost wandered out into it, but then something occurred to her: what if the door should happen to close? Could she leave the place just by waking up? How did dreams work for a being such as herself? She decided to just keep opening doors and glimpsing what was beyond from the safety of the hallway, rather than actually going through any.

She lost track of the number of doors she’d opened after about twenty or so, checking probably another twenty at least after that. Some led to mundane places (one was just a broom closet), some to exotic but recognisable locals, and some to truly fantastical places full of oddly-coloured plants and impossible creatures. The only things any of the places had in common were that there were no humans, and none of the other living beings seemed able or willing to respond to her attempts to communicate with them. Perhaps they could not even see her!

And then, something did. The space beyond the door was pitch-black at first, but she could hear something breathing. Something rustling. Something growling.

And then she could see the something.

It started with just two glowing red eyes that drew closer, and larger, and brighter. More came into view, little by little: buck-like teeth in a strangely round maw, catfish whiskers, scales, spines. A serpentine neck. Fore-claws like the legs of a giant tarantula. Wings like a bat. Like a dragon, she might have supposed, if she had ever met one--and if she wasn't frozen, in motion and in thought, with terror!

It wasn't even its monstrous appearance that had her so frightened, but more its ...presence. It exuded menace, as if it were composed entirely of every evil thought that had ever been made. She knew it would take the utmost delight in ripping her apart, slowly, savouring her pain. She knew without actively contemplating it that there was no way she could fight it--she had no shape in her shapeshifter repertoire that could match its size and strength, and borrowing its form, even if she should manage to snag a scale, would mean taking its evil into herself. That was akin to dying.
Driven instinctually by fear, not focus, she summoned her Fire magic and ignited the air between
her and the beast--to no effect. At least, not on the monster; it did, however, allow some part of her
to recover just enough sense to realise that she didn't have to outfight it; she only had to outrun it.

The thought was enough to break the rest of her free from her terror and use her shapeshifting
ability to transform into a squirrel. While the creature was struggling to move it's bulk through the
door, she was racing back the way she'd come. She felt heat at her back--apparently the beast was
indeed a dragon, of the fire-breathing variety. She turned the corner, but the heat didn't lessen; she
grasped then that her tail was on fire, and used her own control over the element to douse the
flame, plus a bit of Earth to restore her flesh to a non-burnt state. The sound of wood cracking
echoed down the hall. This time, terror spurred her on, rather than rooting her to the spot, but the
halls went off in unfamiliar directions.

This is a dream, she reminded herself. Just wake up!

But it wasn't that simple, apparently. Worse, every time she tried to stop to rest, she could hear the
scrape of something--dragon scales, probably!--and she'd be scurrying for safety again.

Until she reached a dead end.

Turning back, she found fire billowing around the corner she'd just navigated, heralding her
demise. All she could do was shield herself magically and pray it was enough to protect her until
she woke up. She prayed to one god in particular....

As she stared back down the way she came, fingers slipped around her from behind, yanking her
backwards--

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Marie woke with a yelp, Uncle Drosselmeier's hand tight in hers, her godfather looking as afraid
as she'd just felt.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She took in deep drags of cool air, nodding. His face grew dark, like he was furious with her. She
was frightened all over again; she'd never seen him with such a look at all, much less aimed her
way. His grip was crushing.

"Just what did you think you were doing?" he demanded.

"I ...I wasn't trying to do anything but get some sleep!"

He softened, sighing, but still looked grim. "I'm sorry I didn't consider this possibility before. If I
had, we could have discussed it, put some safeguards in place...."

"Safeguards? I just had a nightmare! Everyone gets them!"

"Most people don't have two incarnate bodies, though--they have a single body, with a single
dreamworld. For you and Erich, your alternate bodies are essentially your dreamworlds--and since
you weren't using either of them just now...."

She gasped. "Was I dead, then?"

"Not exactly. You're still always tethered to both bodies, but you were travelling through a sort of
super-subconscious, a dreamworld that's connected to everyone. Your control out there is minimal, and your soul can more easily be harmed. And since you have two bodies, I think your soul didn't know which way to go to reach safety. Thankfully, I heard you calling for me, and was able to use our bond to find you. Next time, you need to decide in advance which body--"

"There won't be a next time," she decided. Not for her--and not for her children.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Raising magical children in two dimensions poses some unique quandaries....

The next day, when he had a moment alone with Marie (he may or may not have done something to get Louise to take a nap), Drosselmeier decided it was time to tell Marie of something he'd noted about her baby....

"A dwarf? A-are you sure? She looks fine!"

"Am I sure?" Drosselmeier was exasperated. Of course he was sure whether or not Alice was a dwarf! Who did Marie think she was talking to? The elven necromancer had focused the bulk of his many centuries on understanding what made life...well, life! He could even alter Threads, the things that determined how the attributes of a person's body--hair colour, height, nose-shape, and countless other things--formed as they grew, as well as served as a guideline of sorts for shapeshifters. Altering Threads required significant understanding of them; he certainly could tell what Alice's Threads determined about her health!

"She is fine!" he assured her. "And I promise you, she won't suffer the ailments typical of her condition that creep up over time--I can correct things like bowed legs or a misaligned spine by gently reshaping them back into to what they would be without the effects of time and gravity. So basically, she's just going to be smaller than the standard human, and somewhat differently proportioned."

"But...can't you do more?" Marie begged, near tears. "Like...like fix her Threads, I mean...."

He was torn between sympathy for a distraught mother and annoyance at the fact that she was distraught. "There's nothing to fix, because there's nothing wrong with her!"

Marie looked stricken, then angry. "In and of herself, no. But living in this world means adapting to it, and she will have a harder life as a dwarf than she would have if she wasn't. The world is built for those significantly taller than she will reach, and mocks the different to boot. Do you want that for her, if it can be avoided?"

Drosselmeier sighed and shook his head, wishing Alice could have been born into a world more like the one he'd once known, centuries ago. He'd been friends with quite a few dwarfs, especially before Ragnarok.... "No, of course not, but I won't alter her Threads without her permission."

"By the time she's old enough to ask, people will already know she's a dwarf!" Marie snapped. "We won't be able to do anything about it then--else how would we explain the changes? I'm her parent! It's up to me to decide what's best for her when she's not old enough to decide for herself! If I have the power to make her life better, then I should!"

Irritation become a cold fury inside Drosselmeier, an anger he never would have thought Marie could trigger in him. "But you don't have that power, do you, Marie? You're not a god--you can't alter her Threads, any more than an ordinary human parent can!"

The shock and hurt on Marie's face lasted only a moment before she wore a coldness to rival his
own. "I may not be a god, but I am a Firstborn -- I can Shape her too, and do more than just straighten her legs or re-align her spine!"

He stood and began to pace. "As if she were clay, to be molded by your whim? And never mind, I suppose, that after her power awakens, it would probably void your effort! Even if she only transforms into her faer Form, when she becomes herself again, she'll revert to the Form dictated by her Threads, not what you Shaped her into! Are you going to continue to forcibly change her then? Reveal to her that you found her to be flawed, and felt she had to be fixed? And what's your ideal height, Marie? Because that's what you'll be forcing on her--your ideal! Hel, while we're at it, let's make her male--for being a woman is a disadvantage too, after all!"

He could see the determination drain out of Marie, and his anger went with it, guilt taking its place (much like he suspected guilt now replaced Marie's resolve). As Marie, a girl he loved as if she were his own child, began to weep, he wished, like any parent, that there was something he could do. The only option he could think of was to speak gently; he hoped it would be enough.

He plopped down beside her on the couch, and took her hand. "She's going to be fine, Marie. Do you know why?"

She shook her head, not meeting his eye.

"Because she has you to look up to--a woman who never lets anyone else dictate what she can and can't do."

Marie smiled a little at that, looking up. "And she has you," she replied, "someone who makes as many as six impossible things happen before breakfast most days."

"Right! And that nephew of mine might be good for something or other. Being her piggy-back mount, maybe."

Marie smiled a little wider, a little more sincerely, and he hoped it would last.

"So we're agreed, then? Instead of holding Alice to society's standards, we'll bend society to hers?"

Marie pursed her lips, thoughtful. "Anyone who disrespects her will answer to a mother lioness" she decided. "Well, as soon as I can manage to track down a lioness hair, anyway."

Drosselmeier laughed heartily at that.

And then Marie made a proclamation that made Drosselmeier wonder if he would ever laugh again.

"You realise, though, that we can't use magic in front of her? Not until she manifests power herself--if she ever manifests it."

"But whoever not?" he whinged, wincing inwardly at how childish he sounded.

"It would be cruel and unrealistic to expect a little girl to keep such a secret!"

"Who says she has to? Anyone she told would assume that she's just an imaginative child!"

"And if she asks us to confirm her beliefs to someone in public, and we deny it?" Marie countered. "She either stops trusting us and feels betrayed, or starts to doubt her own sanity! Not to mention how confused she could get in how to tell the difference between fantasy and reality!"
"There isn't a difference!" he grumbled. What most ordinary humans considered fantasy was the norm for the Gaiankind!

"The mundane world believes there is a dividing line, though," Marie pointed out, "so unless you want her to live in an institution for demonstrating an inability to see and respect that line, we have to let her see the world only through mundane eyes at first, like Erich and I did growing up."

Drosselmeier had hated every moment of that. He understood the logic of what Marie was saying-it was similar to the logic he had employed when he'd (mostly) refrained from demonstrating his abilities to the pair when they were children. But he hadn't thought he would need to hide his true self from a magical child whose parents were also Gaiankind!

Then again, he supposed he really only had to hide the fact that he was practicing magic in front of Alice from Marie...

Still, there was one last hope that he wouldn't have to do that. "Have you talked this decision over with Erich?"

"Not yet," Erich said from his place on the bed, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. Drosselmeier wondered how long the man's consciousness had been back from the Otherworld, listening. "But I agree with Marie--and I'm also concerned with how Alice will feel if she can't do magic herself."

"She's the daughter of two Firstborns! Of course she'll do magic!" It was completely impossible for a child to lack magic with that kind of parentage!

"You know very well that there's more to it than that," Erich countered. "Just because she has magic doesn't mean she'll be able to use it. Even if she Awakens, that won't be for years yet! How would she feel until then, not being able to do something that the rest of us can?"

"Yes, especially since she's already going to have that problem as it is!" Marie weighed in.

"What?" Erich asked, looking confused. He must not have been awake for the dwarfism part of the conversation.

Marie and Drosselmeier filled him in, including about their disagreement.

"I'm sorry, Marie--I understand what you're saying, but I agree with Uncle," Erich said when they were done. "Since Uncle can heal any developmental problems, then what's left is less a matter of health, or even functionality, and more a matter of aesthetics. If she's miserable, we can always fake her death and change her Threads later, create a new identity--but it will be up to her, either way."

Marie sighed and nodded, looking glum. Erich slid his arms around her, smoothing her hair. Feeling guilty that the discussion had already taken up so much of their little time together, Drosselmeier slipped away to let them be alone for the rest.

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"What do you mean, we won't be meeting Alice?" Yven asked Clara, scowling in confusion. "Is she all right?" He hoped it was just a joke--Clara seemed to have picked up an odd sense of humor from that pile of deer-droppings she called 'Uncle'.

"Yes, she's fine--" something about the way Clara said it made Yven suspect that Clara didn't fully believe that "--and Nussnacker and I want to keep her that way!" Clara finished, speaking calmly but firmly. "I told you what happened in that dream I had! I won't risk her being hurt by that...that thing!"
"But we can take precautions--" he tried to suggest.

"The best precaution is not taking the risk in the first place," she insisted, brooking no argument.

He tried again anyway. "We could come to her, then!"

"If she knows such can be done, she'll doubtless want to do it herself. Besides, you might lead something dangerous through the dreamworld to her."

"So what about Jack?" he asked, not bothering to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "I suppose you'll keep him from meeting Huginn?" It infuriated him already that Clara and Nussknacker were friends with the exiled necromancer in the first place. If Huginn (or Drosselmeier, or whatever he was going by now) could interact with both children while Yven and Maribelle couldn't---

"Of course I will!" Clara snapped. "Do you think I don't love my son as much as my daughter? I'm not letting either of them out of their private dreamworlds, and that's that!"

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"Are you sure about this?" Drosselmeier asked Marie for the eighth time in the three or four days since she'd broached the subject of locking the children's personal dreamworld. He'd managed to convince her to think about it a while, hoping that, after the fear wore off, she'd come to her senses, but apparently not.

"Uncle, if we don't do this, can you swear you'll go to sleep whenever Alice does, to protect her? Can you protect her from that...thing? And what about Jack?" she added when he was about to promise that he would and could. "You wouldn't even know when he's asleep!"

Drosselmeier sighed; she wasn't wrong. But..."They're twins, Marie! They have a bond we couldn't possibly understand--it's cruel to keep them apart!"

"Better that cruelty than soul-death!" she snapped. Then she sighed, softening. "It won't necessarily be forever, Uncle. When either of them break the Seal on their magic and Awaken, we'll explain everything, and train them to protect themselves."

"And if they don't break their Seals?"

"Then they won't be able to protect themselves, and keeping their dreamworlds locked would be for the best."

_The best for them, or for you?_ Drosselmeier thought to himself, then felt guilty for it. Marie was only trying to protect her children. He sighed and nodded, internally apologising to the sleeping infant in his arms for what he was about to do. "Is Jack asleep?"

Marie closed her eyes and slumped against her chair, popping over to the Otherworld, then came back to wakefulness a few seconds later. "He is," she confirmed.

Drosselmeier closed his own eyes -- and when he opened them, he was standing in an eerie wood, next to a giant stump. Ignoring the pull of guilt from it, he found a tree with a doorknob on it, and stepped through.

Beyond was a corridor of doors, with was a door to either side of him. One looked like the door to Alice's nursey, with perfect angles and ornate carvings, while the other looked like the side of a
tree, roughly oval and covered in bark, moss, and even mushrooms. Ribbons of rainbow connected the two doors.

They gave Drosselmeier an idea.

First things were first, though. He conjured a special key and lock for each door, installing the locks high in the wood (so they wouldn't be in reach until the children were teens and had some magical experience under their belts) and locking them. He made a duplicate of both keys for himself, and slipped the original keys under their respective doors.

Then, using plant-Shaping (not something he typically would do with dead wood, but hey, this was a dream), he molded smaller doors, with tiny locks and keys, in each larger door, big enough for a twelve-year-old to crawl through, and slipped their keys under them after making copies for himself. Glancing back at his own door, he gave it the same treatment, except this time he made two spares, sticking them under the other doors, saving the original for himself. He then molded a tunnel connecting the three smaller doors. Finally, he set wards around the doors and tunnels, and magical force-shields around the whole thing, for good measure.

There. Now the children were shielded from threats roaming the halls of shared consciousness, but still had potential access to each other's dreams, if nowhere else, once they were old enough to unlock the smaller doors--and he still had access to them both, just in case.

He nodded to himself in satisfaction, pleased with his clever compromise, then woke up, telling Marie, "It's done." She clasped his hand, smiling fondly in gratitude, and he felt a stab of guilt for not divulging exactly what he had gotten it done....
Chapter 3

Drosselmeier invents something, and Dinah and the white rabbit enter the picture.

"You could try again," Drosselmeier suggested for what had to be the hundredth time since the birth of the twins, almost two months gone.

"I have, Uncle, over and over," Marie assured him. "Don't you think I want to be able to be with both of my babies at the same time? Or be with my husband, rather than spending most of the time apart, him in one world and me in the other? But I'm telling you, I was only able to be in both realms at the same time before because I was in labour--I was in too much pain to be asleep in either reality! And before you suggest it, I have no intention of being pregnant in both places at once ever again."

The dejected look on his face suggested he'd meant to ask exactly that. And then he grew thoughtful. She could easily imagine gears turning in his head, like in one of his famous clockworks.

"Penny for your thoughts," she offered.

"I'm afraid they are far more costly than that--but with luck, you may reap the benefits for free.... Oh! I almost forgot why I'm here--I believe I've found a nanny!"

Marie, who'd been bouncing Alice in her arms, froze, save for turning her head to stare at her uncle. Marie had not had a nanny as a child, and had not even remotely entertained the idea of getting one for Alice!

"Thank you, Uncle, but I'd prefer to raise my daughter myself." This idea of seeing her child for only an hour a day, like a toy one took out for a little while then put away in a cupboard, out of sight and mind, was entirely abhorrent. "Not to mention, it's going to be hard enough to keep the secret of our magic from Alice without having to keep it from someone else on a daily basis as well."

"Oh, of course," her uncle quickly agreed, "but you can't deny that, now that Louise has gone back to France, it would be prudent to have help, just in case you both need to be in the Otherworld at some point and I don't happen to be immediately available. Four hands are better than two! At least just talk with the woman," he cajoled.

Marie sighed and nodded, resuming her bouncing of the baby.
"Wonderful!" he cheered, then hurried over to the door. He didn't leave, though, just poked his head out and said into the hall, "Come in, please, my dear!"

Marie froze again--his prospective nanny was already there? Her uncle must have been quite confident of his ability to talk Marie into giving the nanny a chance! Well, she supposed that confidence was justified, seeing as he'd succeeded.

When the woman in question peeked through the door, Marie suddenly understood that Drosselmeier had an ulterior motive for his suggestion--and she did not fault him for it in the slightest.

"Dinah?" she whispered.

The woman beamed and stepped inside. Marie let out a happy squeal and did her best to hug the woman with Alice still in one arm. Dinah purred in her ear.

Marie's current self had never met Dinah, but as the original Clara, she had. The last she'd seen her, the woman had been a cat--one of past-Clara's three waercat handmaidens.

It registered suddenly for Marie that Clara and Dinah's last moments together had not been happy ones. "Oh! But after what happened, are you sure you want to be anywhere near me? My father almost executed you because of me!"

The queen of the local mice had promised harm to Clara in retribution for the treatment of her people by Clara's father, a baron. Clara had been basically imprisoned in her quarters, so she'd lulled her handmaidens (effectively, her guards) to sleep and slipped out of her room--and was subsequently cursed to resemble a nutcracker. Clara's mother, Gretal, managed to talk her husband into just banishing the waercat sisters for their failure, rather than executing them.

Dinah cupped Marie's cheek fondly. "I blame your father, not you. If he had treated the mice better, you would never have been in danger. Besides, it doesn't speak well of my sisters and I that you fooled us and we fell asleep on the job. A better question is, do you want me working for you after that?" she added with a wince.

Marie nodded vigorously. Dinah had been one of Clara's best friends! "You didn't just fall asleep; I did everything I could to make sure you would! Now, what about your sisters?" she asked.

"Where are they?"

Dinah's eyes grew wistful. "I wish I knew. We got separated a century or so later, and I never saw either of them again. It was pure chance that Huginn and I met a couple months ago--I was serving tables in a little alehouse, when he came in to get out of the rain, and recognised me."

Marie doubted very much that it was simple chance, especially judging by the twinkle now in her godfather's eye, but didn't bother to say so. "Well, I'm glad he found you!"

"As am I!" Dinah beamed. Then her face grew a little wistful. "Huginn says you named your little one after my sisters and me?"

"I did," Marie confirmed with a loving smile. "You were my best friends outside of Nuss and Huginn. Do you think Adalhaid would mind, though, that I changed it to 'Alice'?"

Dinah laughed. "She never much cared for her name herself, so not in the slightest! Do you remember that time we stole those tarts from the kitchen, and she tried to herself invisible, but couldn't make her head disappear...?"

"Do I! I was so envious she could turn invisible at all!"
They were so busy catching up, Marie didn't even notice her uncle leave. **Uncle?** she asked privately, wondering if she'd upset the man. She hadn't meant to ignore him!

**I just thought you two could use some time to catch up,** he assured her from wherever he'd gone off to.

**Thank you. For bringing her back to me, I mean,** Marie clarified

**Anything for my dear ones--her included. And someday we'll find her sisters as well!**

Even with a nanny, it seemed that Marie and Erich didn't like leaving Alice alone (that was to say, without at least one of the parents in attendance) for very long. The same went for Jack. They would only stay together for about half an hour at a time before trading realms, with Dinah and sometimes Drosselmeier watching Alice when Clara and Nussknacker were both in the Otherworld, and Jack apparently being under the careful watch of Yven, Maribelle, and the dryad Walnussheim while Marie and Erich were in Midgard together. In other words, the pair only saw each other for a couple of hours or so total every day; as the days went by, it was obvious that they were beginning to miss each other terribly.

Well, it was obvious when Drosselmeier saw them together, anyway—which wasn't often, given how intent he was in working on his latest big project: a gift for them. The morning he finally finished it, three months after Alice and Jack's birth, he was beyond eager to give it to the couple. Waiting until evening one Saturn's day, when both Marie and Erich were in Midgard for a little while, was a slow sort of torture for him.

That didn't mean the elf couldn't have some fun with the gift in the meantime, though--nor that he would just hand it over as soon as was possible.

Throughout the day, whenever people in the house (Marie, her parents and brother when they visited for luncheon, and Dinah) set things down for a moment, when they went to pick said things up again, they would find the objects had moved. Teacups were half-emptied, and biscuits had bites taken out of them. Bookmarks went missing. Doors and windows left open were inexplicably closed, and vice versa. Look away for a moment, or maybe even just blink, and Drosselmeier would be impossibly far away from where he'd just been.

"All right, how are you doing it?" Marie asked once her family had left. She was trying to be stern, Drosselmeier suspected, but failing.

"Whatever do you mean?" Drosselmeier asked innocently. Erich wasn't there yet--Drosselmeier needed to stall. Ah! He knew just the way....

Reaching into his pocket, he felt around the rim of a round bit of metal within it, found a button, and pressed it.

Marie seemed to pause.

He hurried out of the house, and the world was just as immobile as Marie. Birds were paused mid-flight, wings completely still, and yet they didn't fall. He had to admit, it was pretty amazing to see! But as much as he wanted to enjoy the fruit of his labour, it would delay all the longer the real gratification: Marie and Erich's reaction. He pressed the button again. Wings flapped. A man
shrieked as Drosselmeier seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and the god found the sound immensely satisfying. He wished he could have seen Marie’s face when he’d vanished right before her eyes! He gazed longingly at the house, wanting to go back in, but he knew he would never last that long under Marie’s scrutiny.

He pulled the round metal object—a pocket-watch—out of his pocket and opened it. He sighed. Four more hours, if Erich was on time. Four more, and Drosselmeier had to refrain from using his new toy, lest the wait become even longer.

Wait a minute....

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Shiverwinter eyed the human warily through the bushes, reluctant to get any closer. The young rabbit brownie wasn’t just named for his white fur and ice-blue eyes, but rather for his timidity, which often led to him shaking with fear. He wasn’t quite to the point of trembling now, but he was fairly certain he would be before the day was through, considering what he’d been charged to do: his friends had dared him to sneak into a human house and steal something.

He’d been scouting around this one, looking for an opening, when this man had materialised out of thin air, right before Shiverwinter’s eyes! A powerful mage, to be sure! Getting into the house suddenly was an even more dangerous proposition than he’d thought just a moment ago....

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Minutes after Drosselmeier thought up his latest idea, the watch had a new button on it, courtesy of Drosselmeier’s metal-Shaping ability. (It didn’t take that long for the Shaping, so much as to do the alteration to the spell on the device.) Drosselmeier pressed it, and the world sped by him, the hands on the watch moving incredibly fast.

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The mage disappeared again. Shiverwinter wasn’t sure if the man was gone, or just invisible. He debated whether to try a different house. The thing was, any other house could hold a mage for all he knew! And if this one had really left, didn’t that make this house the safer option? Plus he could brag that he went into the home of a mage! And really, mage aside, he just liked the feel of this place.

After waiting a long while (just to be safe!), he carefully circled the house, searching for an egress; not finding any, he returned to his spot under the bushes, deciding it was time for an afternoon nap.

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Drosselmeier quickly pressed the button again, returning the passage of time for himself to normal—and found he’d overshot the four-hour mark by five minutes. Cursing, he pressed the other button. Checking to see that the birds had frozen again, he then went into the house, careful to close the door slowly (by his current standards), lest the door slam and alert his godchildren.
Shiverwinter awoke from his nap just in time to see the door open, seemingly of its own accord. He didn't dare think about it, couldn't squander the chance. The racing of his heart was nothing compared to that of his feet; one moment, he was under the brush, and the next, he was inside, hiding behind the door as he caught his breath. Unfortunately, air became elusive again as, terrifyingly, the door closed again, the force behind it still invisible.

Marie and Erich were frozen in the midst of a hello kiss. Smirking, Drosselmeier stood close to them; then, hands behind his back, he de-pressed a button.

Their kiss finished, Erich and Marie noticed him and let out identical squeaks.

Shiverwinter had just decided he was safe, that the invisible force must have passed him by, when he heard an alarming sound come from a nearby room. Instinctually, he bolted into the room across from the first, looking for a place to hide. There, he found something like a giant bookcase-full of strange animals and tiny humans, instead of books! He almost bolted again, but his mind caught up with his vision, and he understood that nothing in it was real. The beings were dolls, like the ones his mother had made for him and his siblings, but bigger--some even larger than himself!-- and in more refined detail. Feeling a little more at ease, he approached and reached out to touch a figure on a bottom shelf.

His paw met...hard air? After a moment, he realized that there was a pane of glass between him and the dolls, like a window. Searching, he found a latch holding the window closed--more like a pair of doors, really. He hopped high and batted the latch with his paw, wincing as the window-doors creaked open a little. Staying stock-still for a minute, he waited, but no one came into the room. Holding his breath, he opened one side a little further, cringing as it creaked some more, and slipped inside.

Settled, he pricked his ears--and thus heard a most intriguing conversation....

"A glamour couldn't have worked on us...could it?" Marie asked her husband. "I mean, Adalhaid did it to me when I was originally Clara, but that Clara wasn't a Firstborn!"

Drosselmeier decided it was best not to point out that he, being a god, could easily shield his power from even a Firstborn's psychic abilities.

"Mayhap he developed some sort of invisibility coat?" Erich asked, raising a brow. "One that bends light or something?"

Drosselmeier blinked in surprise, admiring the lad's cleverness. Using a magical object was far less tiring than maintaining a spell! "No, but that's not a bad idea! I should work on that sometime...."
He was so engrossed in the idea, proverbial gears working in his head, that he didn't notice Marie step behind him, only felt the pocketwatch being suddenly plucked from his hand. He whirled on her. "Hey!"

"He's stopping time!" Marie declared triumphantly, holding the timepiece up by the chain.

"Not precisely," Drosselmeier sniffed, snatching the device back, "but a close guess." She had always been clever! "It creates a pocket dimension in which time moves differently for the bearer than it does in Midgard. This button," he pointed, "gives you one hour of your own time for every second that passes in Midgard. This one," he pointed to another button, "makes an hour of Midgardian time pass for every second you spend in the pocket dimension. And this one," he pointed to the last button, "Toggles between keeping that dimension restricted to the body of the bearer, and expanding it to a twenty-foot bubble around them. The effect lasts only twelve hours--you either get twelve hours in your pocket dimension, or make twelve hours pass in Midgard, depending on which you use. But that's just a fail-safe--you can use it again immediately with another push of a button."

"Can you travel back in time with it?" Erich asked eagerly.

"Did I say that there was a button for that? No!" Drosselmeier grumbled, annoyed that his nephew had spoiled his surprise by making the device seem less impressive. "Rewritten history is a dangerous proposition in a lot of ways. Best to keep one eye on the present, and the other looking forward." (Never mind that one of Drosselmeier's eyes was usually covered by a patch.)

Erich nodded, chastened.

"How did you move things if you were in a pocket dimension?" Marie wondered.

"What things?" he hedged.

She wasn't falling for it. "You weren't using the bubble, because I would have seen you moving things, since I was close enough to have been in it myself. But how can you touch things in Midgard if you're in the skin-tight dimension? Or see things in Midgard, for that matter?"

He stifled a grin, the intelligence of his goddaughter flushing him with pride. "There are different kinds of dimensions. Some are faraway places, and fixed in relation to Midgard, but some are more like...folds in fabric, and mutable. Here." He put on a glove. "My hand is no longer 'outside', but I can still affect things." He picked up a knick-knack, then laid it down again. "As for being able to see, well, that took a bit of work on my part in casting the spell just right to get the dimension to function that way.... The simple version is, the bubble is like a window that stretches all around you. That bubble will protect you from harm better than glass could, though, preventing anything from trying to occupy the same space as you, and it's not two-way--people can't see in."

Marie nodded thoughtfully. "Fascinating, Uncle.... So, did you have any particular use for this glorious object in mind--besides playing pranks, I mean?" she asked with a wry smile.

"It's for us," Erich replied before Drosselmeier could. The elf glanced his nephew's way and found the young man moved to tears. Erich continued, "You made it so that Marie and I could spend more time together."

Drosselmeier smiled fondly and nodded. The boy was pretty smart himself! "At least until the twins are sleeping through their respective world's nights, and you don't feel like one of you has to be handy for both of them every moment of the day."

"Right," Marie agreed. "When we're able to go back to our old schedule again, we won't need it
anymore, save for emergencies--if even then."

Drosselmeier frowned. "What--"

"I love you for making this, Uncle, but it's a bit dangerous, don't you think? Imagine what criminals could do with such a thing!"

Oh. "I'm not in the habit of thinking like criminals," he pouted.

Marie smirked. "Perhaps there's a bit of larceny in me, then." Her face softened, and she kissed his cheek. "I do appreciate it, Uncle. But at the very least, I worry what mischief Alice could get into if she discovers it! So let's say that once she starts climbing the cupboards, we lock the watch away somewhere safe--inside the clockwork castle, maybe. Agreed?"

Drosselmeier sighed. "Agreed."

"And you won't make another such device?" Erich added.

He winced; they knew him too well. "I won't make another," he promised, even as he tried to think of a loophole.

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When the conversation in the next room turned to more mundane topics, like scheduling, Shiverwinter turned his attention back to his surroundings.

There was a doll near him that was just his size, wearing a very fine, pale-blue coat. His friend Thornprickle had an overcoat that Shiverwinter had long been envious of, but even when made by the best brownie seamstresses and tailors, brownie clothes had a certain...rustic quality. Thornprickle was the one who'd first dared Shiverwinter to fetch a human thing from inside a human home; Thornprickle would surely come to regret doing so--and not just because he would lose the wager he'd placed on Shiverwinter's failure....

Shiverwinter had just gotten the coat on, when he felt a tickle of magic enter the room. Trembling, he turned his attention back to the room's doorway--and met the tawny eyes of a long-haired cat. It leapt towards him, slamming its paws against the glass, holding the door shut. Shiverwinter scrambled back, but quickly met the wooden back of the shelf.

There was nowhere to go.

**INTRUDER!** the cat called out, tail swishing.

**Please, I'm sorry! I...** He what? Hadn't mean to trespass? He certainly had! He just hadn't meant to get caught. The cat--and its fellow residents--had every right to do whatever they pleased to a thieving brownie like himself. He screwed his eyes closed, unable to bear witness to his own execution.

*I'm so sorry, mother....*

"Well, what have we here?" came a deep, rumbling voice.

Shiverwinter found his eyes cracking open of their own accord, cursing them for their treachery. Standing tall above him was the mage--and two somewhat younger humans, one of them female.
"Oh, Dinah, come now, I think you can stand down. He's just a little bunny!" the woman--Marie, Shiverwinter assumed from his eavesdropping--chided the cat.

Shiverwinter relaxed a little.

**And Mouserinks was just a little mouse,** the cat replied.

Marie pursed her lips. "Mmm, fair point."

Having lost his ally so quickly, Shiverwinter trembled more than ever.

"Oh, but look at him; he's terrified!" Marie protested.

**That doesn't mean he's not a threat,** Dinah pointed out. "Every enemy would be afraid in such a position as he's now in. Or he could be a good actor!"

The younger male--Erich, Shiverwinter guessed--reached out and locked the cabinet. "There. He can't get out until we let him, so we can all relax--no one's hurting anyone. Dinah, maybe go east something and get human again, all right?"

The cat looked to Marie, who nodded. The cat left.

"Now, young man," the mage began, kneeling down before the cabinet. "Who are you, and why are you in our toy cabinet?"

Shiverwinter was never much of a liar, so opted for the truth, introducing himself, then explaining how Thornprickle had dared him to steal something from a human home. As he spoke, he felt a strange pressure in his head, which faded when he was done.

"I'm quite certain he's telling the truth," the uncle assured his godchildren, a merry twinkle in his eye. "He's just here because of a little game."

His godchildren smiled, and Shiverwinter felt his fears melt away under all their warm, kind faces.

"I didn't realise there were any brownies nearby," Marie noted. "How come we haven't felt them?"

The mage shrugged. "They're small enough to have easily escaped notice, seeing as we weren't looking for them. Where are you from, anyway, Shiverwinter? Do you live nearby?"

Shiverwinter shook his head. **I came through a barrowway.**

The mage gasped. "They're kind of like portals, but underground, and they aren't connected to Gates."

"Barrowways?" Marie asked.

Erich looked gobsmacked. "They're kind of like portals, but underground, and they aren't connected to Gates."

Marie scowled. "I thought you have to have a Gate to come to Midgard from the Otherworld!"

"I thought so too!" the uncle replied. "As far as I knew, the barrowways had all been closed! But if there are still some left, then this means you can bring Jack here, when he's old enough!"

"Old enough?" Marie asked.

"Well, the barrowways are small--Jack'll have to shapeshift to a brownie size to use them, so we'll
have to wait until his Seal is broken. What say you, little one--will you allow us passage through your burrow in trade for the coat?"

**Through my burrow?** Shiverwinter asked, twitching his nose in confusion. **But ... there is no 'through'. The barrowway leads from here to the burrow, and out again. There's nowhere else to go!**

"You mean the burrow isn't in the Otherworld?" the mage asked, clearly dismayed.

**Sort of? They say it was made in the Otherworld, but there's no egress to the rest of it.**

The mage plopped fully down onto the floor with a sigh. "Oh, so it's a pocket dimension. So much for that idea."

"It's all right, Uncle," Marie assured him, patting his arm. "We're no worse off than before, right?"

"I suppose," the man grumbled.

"And there's your invention...."

"Oh!" The man brightened.

Patting her uncle on the head, Marie then unlocked the cabinet and opened the door. "There you are, free to go. And you can keep the coat!"

**You're sure?** Shiverwinter asked as he gingerly stepped out, feeling guilty--he'd meant to steal it, after all, and here they were, kindly gifting it to him!

"Quite. It looks so fine on you, it would be an insult to put it back on the doll!" she added with a wink. "Consider it an apology for Dinah scaring you half to death."

"I can make my own apologies, milady," another woman sniffed as she came into the room with a tray, the scent of baked goods and tea drifting from it. She set it down on a table, took a biscuit from it, and knelt down, holding the treat out to Shiverwinter. "My deepest apologies for frightening you."

He understood then that this woman was also the cat. Despite her apology, he balked for a moment, fearing a trap--until his stomach announced his hunger, overcoming his fear of her.

A clock chimed as he scarfed the biscuit down.

"Oh! I best get over, before Yven and Maribelle start to worry!" Marie fretted. "It was nice to meet you, Shiverwinter! Feel free to visit again whenever you like--so long as you're an ordinary rabbit when you do!" And she hurried away.

**Ordinary rabbit? Oh, so as not to alert the neighbors,** Shiverwinter assumed. Rabbits in this world didn't usually walk on two legs, wear clothes, or talk--even just psychically.

"Eh, there's a little more to it, involving our daughter," Erich replied. "Would you like some more biscuits? Some tea, maybe? And I can explain everything."

It turned out to be quite a story.

And so Shiverwinter resolved to take Marie up on her offer and come back now and then, to hear more stories and have more biscuits, glad to have made some new friends outside of the warren.

Friends he wouldn't dare tell anyone at the warren about, lest he be ordered never to return to
Midgard....

End Notes

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