At The Beginning With You

by hinotoriii

Summary

At the end of it all, Alice had the choice to leave or the choice to stay in Underland. But what happens after her decision is made?

Notes

This was first posted on fanfic.net back in 2010, but I'm posting it here so that I can keep it archived with a few of my other stories. It's complete, however I will be checking over chapters very briefly for any spelling and grammar errors that may have skimmed by my notice in the past, so the parts will be updated bit by bit.

This story is set directly after Alice defeats the Jabberwocky in the Tim Burton movie, but spins an AU twist on how things ended in a way that I think many of us wished had happened.

Hopefully, there will be some readers out there that will enjoy this. Or maybe even just old readers of the series who will remember and smile at seeing this story pop up again. :}

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/1008847.
All this time, she was sure – no convinced it was nothing but a dream. A fantasy world she'd thought up in her mind. An effect of bumping her head after falling down that rabbit hole, something she would soon enough awaken from when the time was right and everything was over.

But now, everything was over. Everything was over, and Alice now knew that the place she had known as 'Wonderland' since she was a young child was in fact, part of the reality. It existed, as much as she herself existed, and that very fact made her ever more curious about the place. She wanted to continue to explore, to know more, to learn more. About the world itself, about the people, about those who she’d known to become her friends. She wanted to know as much as she could about Wonderland – or Underland as was it's real name – as she possibly could.

But she couldn't.

Because no matter how much she wanted to, how much in her heart of hearts she wished she could remain in the beautiful, dream like place – she had unfinished business to attend to in London. Back home.

Although within her, London didn't feel much like home to her anymore. For no one understood her, and Alice felt like she didn't fit in with those around her. Of course, she loved her family, but no matter how much she loved them, she wasn't – what was the word she was searching for? Satisfied? No, that wasn't right. She knew she loved them, and loved being with them even if they didn't understand her most of the time in the same way her Father did. No, that wasn't it. It was something ... simpler. Something she felt in Underland that she didn't feel back home.

And then it came to her.

She wasn't happy.

Alice understood now. She was tired of the restrictions laid upon her in her world. How, people were expected to act a certain way, expected to dress to a certain code. None of it made sense to her. Why couldn't people be what they were inside, and not be constricted to what was deemed 'acceptable'? After all, what even was deemed acceptable? Who made the decisions on how people should behave, how they should conform? Alice wasn't sure, and she was pretty sure even her Mother didn't have the answer to such a question.

But those very constraints that binded a person in invisible chains, they were the very reason why she had to return home. She was expected to marry – or at least to accept a marriage proposal, and she had left Hamish at the gazebo due to her own fear and disgust at the reality of such an idea where her future was decided for her, just like that. She had just left him there, standing by himself – waiting for an answer. An answer the both of them knew the moment she ran away. As much as she never wanted to see his face again, she had to. At least to set the record straight, to not leave him waiting.

How long had she even been in Underland for anyway? Had a lot of time passed? Were her family looking for her? Alice wasn't sure how quickly time passed in her world compared to the one she was in now. For all she knew, she could have been gone for far longer than she thought she had. Her family could be searching for her, could be worried for her.

So with the vial in her hand handed to her from the White Queen herself, she pulled it closer to her. Anything she desired? Was it true the contents of the vial could give her that? What was it she
desired?

Alice took the stopper out of the vial, raising it slightly as she admired its colour. If she returned to London, would she ever be able to return to the land she was in now? Would she remember it? She hoped so. No, she knew she would. She'd thought it a dream before, but now she knew it was real. She knew it existed. Of course she'd return.

She brought the vial to her mouth, preparing to drink the contents, when she heard a quiet voice behind her. A voice she knew all too well.

"You could ... stay."

Alice stopped midway, still not having drunk the contents of the vial. She turned her head, bringing herself face to face with the person who had spoken. The Hatter, someone who had managed to become her best and most loyal friend upon her adventures. She looked at his expression, full of hope, hesitance – and sadness at the same time. She felt something within her break slightly as she watched his face, noting that she'd never seen this side of him before. These emotions he was showing, they were new to her, - perhaps even new to himself, she wasn't sure – and Alice knew she didn't like him wearing them.

And when their eyes met, that's when she realised it. What she really desired.

Her family did not only live in London. No, not any more. Alice realised that now, she had a family here as well. All her friends, all those she had met and those that had helped her along the way on her adventure, they were her family too. And it would hurt her to leave them; especially now everything had become clear to her, as the realisation sunk into her mind.

And so she smiled sadly as she turned fully to face the Hatter. A small voice inside her was telling her to stay, if only for a little while. Why did she have to leave now, just when she was beginning to have fun?

"What an idea- A ridiculous, mad, wonderful idea," she replied, her smile stretching slightly.

Who said she had to leave for London right away? She was already here now; why not just stay for a while longer? After all, there was time to celebrate now that she had performed her role as their Champion, and there was still – in a way, much for her to do in Underland itself. London would always be there for her, whenever she felt it would be the right time for her to return.

"Okay, I'll stay. For a while at least."

She watched her friend's expression, first filled with shock – as if he couldn't believe what she had just said. He blinked, and then blinked again, before a smile broke over his own face when the reality of what she had said finally sunk in. If Alice was correct, she was sure she had never seen such a large smile appear on his face before, and witnessing such a thing made her own smile grow as well.

And to her shock, he closed the gap between the two of them and hugged her tightly. It was then Alice's time to blink in surprise, but she soon got over it, and decided to hug the Hatter back. At that he picked her up off the ground and span her around, obviously ecstatic with her decision in staying with them, with him. Alice couldn't help but laugh joyfully at her friend's actions, inside feeling happy that she was the one that brought him such joy with her decision.

She'd stay, for a while.

Or at least; that was her original plan.
A few months had passed, and Alice found herself peering out of the window of the Hatters house, admiring the strange view that was in front of her. Rain, was nothing new to her – however she did not recall ever seeing such weather in Underland before. The fact that it was raining now made her realise how she had, in fact, seen hardly any change in weather in Underland at all, and it made her wonder what other weather they experience. Do they experience things such as snow, and thunderstorms, just like they did back in London, or not?

She heard the Hatter walk into the room, still running around preparing for – what would have been – their daily tea party event. Alice frowned then. Why did it decide to rain now when they were almost ready to leave?

"You know, I don't think I've ever seen it rain here before." She said suddenly, almost to herself rather than to anyone else.

The Hatter however looked up from what he was doing to face Alice, who's back was too him as she continued to look out the window. He smiled, entertained by the idea that she could be amazed by something as small as the rain outside. He turned back to the preparations he was handling before she had spoke, but continued to speak in response to her.

"Well, you wouldn't have. Whenever you appeared here in the past, it was always before the rainy seasons fell upon us." He looked around, almost as if he had lost something very important. "If you're worried about the weather however, you needn't be. The rain will pass soon."

Alice – who was still looking out of the window – pondered on what he had said. She turned her head slightly, watching him hastily packing and unpacking things.

"How are you sure the rain will pass soon? Surely it's unpredictable as to how long it will last."

"Unpredictable? Never. Why, rain showers never last that long. You'll see, we'll be having a tea party quicker than you can imagine." The Hatter said as he finished packing, pulling the lid over the small sized basket. He turned around, and caught Alice's confused expression, replying to it with his signature smile.

Alice on the other hand, just sighed then and smiled back. She believed him, only because – well she still had no idea how things worked in the land, and she was learning very slowly about the many mysteries of Underland. The Hatter on the other hand, he knew the place all too well, as he had demonstrated when giving her tours to various places around the land.

"Well, if you say so. I guess we just ... wait till it passes then?" She walked over to a nearby chair, and sat in it. Waiting around would normally be a very boring experience to her. However, when with the man who she was accompanied with right now, there were no such things as a boring experience. Alice guessed that no matter how long it took for the rain to pass over, it wouldn't be a long wait once they both got talking.
"Indeed." The Hatter replied, following Alice's movements and sitting down in a chair not too far away from her.

The sat in silence for a short moment, Alice spending that time to look down at her shoes. They we're new, given to her by the Queen when she first started living in the palace after she agreed to stay for a while. In a way, she was glad the two of them we're waiting instead of trying to walk out in the rain. Alice did not want her gift to be covered in mud as they trekked through the slushy mud outside.

"I've been meaning to ask you something," Came the Hatters voice suddenly. Alice looked up once he started talking, wondering what it was he was going to ask her. After all, he was totally unpredictable, for all she knew he could be wondering why tree's were green.

"Since you've been here, you'velearnt a lot about this place. Yes?" Alice nodded at the question when the Hatter turned to look at her. "Well, I wanted to ask you something – about your world. Actually, I want to know a lot about your world, but I never know how to start. But, I was thinking about this very thing this morning, and it still leaves me pondering. Would you mind, answering a question for me?"

Alice blinked then. The Hatter wanted to know something about her world? About London, which was – in all honesty – so boring in contrast to Underland? She chuckled slightly. In all fairness, he had taught her so much about his world already; it was no wonder why he was curious about her own.

"Of course," She replied smiling at him again. "What do you want to know?"

His expression changed then to one of happiness, and he shifted in his seat as if to get comfortable. Alice only hoped his question was something easy, and something in her ability to answer.

"Well, it's about – your literature, really. You see, there are some books from your world around Underland, and, after your first visit here, I was able to find some. They are ... different from the stories we have here." He paused, a frown appearing on his face as confusion seemed to battle in his mind.

"Well, what kinds of stories have you read from my world?" She asked, trying to work out the various genres and variations of stories they had within her own mind, and trying to find which one would confuse her friend the most.

"Oh, they're all pretty similar actually! And – that's what confuses me really. They're all different stories, set in different places – but the main theme seems to be the same. And no matter how many times one reads them, the idea never becomes clear to me." Again a pause and the Hatter turned to Alice, pure confusion written on his face. "Alice, why is it the woman in your worlds novels often seems to need to be kissed for their dilemmas to be resolved?"

Alice sat in silence for a while, stunned at the question. She just stared at the Hatter, expecting him to say something else. Noting his expression was one which held complete innocence and wonder, she laughed. Of course, he would be reading fairy stories wouldn't he? And of course, they would be the most confusing to him.

As she laughed however, the Hatters expression only grew more confused. She looked up at him, and tried to stifle her laughter at watching his face. Once she was sure she had calmed down enough to talk, she proceeded to answer his question.

"Oh Hatter, they're fairy stories!"
Once again, his expression only grew more confused.

"Fairy ... stories? But, Alice dear – not many of the stories had many fairies in them. In fact, the few I read had none. Well, apart from one about a woman who pricked her finger on a spinning wheel, but even then there weren't real fairies-"

Alice tried to hold in her laughter even more then, knowing all too well that her friend couldn't help but be confused over the stories. She shook her head, and chuckled slightly.

"No no Hatter, they are not called fairy stories because they have fairies in them. They're works of fiction. A way in which – well, a way in which people can escape from the reality, in a way. We call them fairy stories because the act as a sort of escape route, per say."

"But if they are an escape route, then why do they all follow the same structure? Is that how the people in your world wish for things to be?"

"No! Things are very different in London from what they are in the fairy stories Hatter, which is true. But the stories – they're just that. Just stories. There's really no truth behind them. People in my world read them, as a way of pleasure. Just like – just like how you always have your tea parties. There a source of enjoyment."

"O-Oh." He replied, pondering on what Alice had said for a moment.

Alice felt her own mind spinning in confusion then. How could she explain such stories in such a simple way to him? To her, they were so obvious why they were the way they were, but as she put herself in the Hatters position, she began to wonder what he was possibly thinking; about what he thought the stories could possibly mean.

"So, the champions in your world don't follow the ones in these books then? There was no one who got pricked by a spinning wheel, or – someone who ate a poison apple, oh! And there was that one of the servant girl and the glass shoe, was that not true either?"

"No Hatter, none of them are real."

Another pause and the Hatter once again looked as if he was trying to process all the information at once. Alice on the other hand, was trying to remember what fairy tales she had read as a child, and remembered how she had once loved them as a kid. How she loved as her father had read them to her as a young child and how she would go to sleep dreaming of such places. Until, of course, she ended up in her own fairytale world. After that she continued to dream of her wonderland then, even though she couldn't remember such a place as being real.

"It – did leave me confused. You see, if that was how the champions in your world became known for whom they were, then we have a very different view on what a champion is. And, you are already a champion in this world – but for different reasons. Much better reasons if you ask me. Although, that's not to say the champions in your fairy stories aren't champions at all, not at all, it's just they aren't what I would have thought a champion would be and-"

"Hatter."

As soon as she spoke his name, he stopped his babbling. "I'm fine. Thank you." He squeaked.

Alice shook her head again, still thinking about the fairy tales she knew in her past. Silence had passed over the two of them for a few moments, that is, until Alice spoke up once again.

"You know, if the stories are anything to go by, then, my experience here would be deemed a
fairy story in its own right. That is, the events that have happened since I've been here would be what you would find in a fairytale story. There are many more tales out there Hatter. There's one, with a girl who walks into the house of three bears without them knowing -"

"How rude of her! Does she not knock?"

Alice smiled then, amused by the Hatters outburst at the story.

"No, but they soon find her there, tucked up asleep in one of their beds. Oh, then there's one with these two young children who find a house made out of cake in the woods –"

"A house of cake you say? Why, that would be a perfect place for one of our tea parties!"

"Well, you say that – a horrible witch lived in the house. And she used the house made of cake and other sweet foods as a way to lure the children in, so that she could eat the children."

"When you describe her like that, you make her sound like the bloody red Queen."

Alice noticed the Hatters eyes starting to change then, and felt she quickly should change the topic.

"Oh, but she gets her comeuppance in the end, and the children escape, safe and sound. There was also the story of a girl who fell in love with a prince, but she didn't know he was a prince because a witch had turned him into a beast beforehand, as a punishment of his own selfishness towards others."

"Your stories ... some of them are very confusing."

"Not really, they may seem it – but once you read them, there actually very easy to understand."

The Hatter looked at Alice then, as if not believing her for a moment then. Alice knew they sounded confusing, based on the way she was explaining them to him – but she knew if he went into too much detail, she'd probably confuse herself, what with having to explain so many of them to him at once.

"Alice my dear, you are going to have to tell me these stories of yours in detail one day. For I would love to hear them, especially now you point out that there are so many more out there. This one about the prince who is a beast – it ... sounds interesting. Would you tell me about them one day?"

Alice felt herself beam in happiness then. For some reason, the idea of explaining fairy stories to the Hatter was a marvellous suggestion. He obviously wanted to know more, and secretly, Alice was more than happy to explain and tell them to him.

"Of course! I'd be happy to tell them to you. I know quite a few, thanks to my father. He loved telling them to me when I was a child."

The fact that he was taking such an interest in them filled her heart. Her best friend wanted nothing more but to understand more about the very things she loved the most, and it was the first time someone had shown such an interest. Usually, people wouldn't understand why she took such an interest in them, and they would consider her strange and peculiar for doing so. Trust the Hatter however to feel the complete opposite way about her interests.

"Oh!" He suddenly called out, his face also beaming with happiness, and his eyes giving the hint that he was excited about the entire prospect they were planning. "Alice! You said that this place was like your very own fairy story, am I correct?"
Alice nodded then, not understanding what he was getting at. Whatever it was, he was conjuring up another plan in his mind. As she nodded, Alice noticed the Hatter's smile only grew larger.

"Well then you must let me make you a dress! A dress like the ones the women in these stories wear! Only, of course it will be very Alice too, seeing as I wouldn't want to make a dress if it wasn't you, and didn't reflect who you were. But oh, I already have the ideas!"

She chuckled once again and watched the Hatter get up from where he was sitting, leaving him to continue to babble on about his grand idea as he began to pace the room.

"- Of course you can pick what colour you'd like it to be, and whatever fabric you'd want used to make it. I think I have some in the next room actually which you can choose out of. If not, I have many in my room I can bring down one day for you –"

"Hatter!" She said through her laughter, noticing him jump slightly as he turned his head to look at her, his train of thought being interrupted. He blinked, and turned around to look at her fully. She got up, and walked over to where he was standing; knowing all too well that his mind was currently still planning and working over his idea for her dress.

"You were rambling again."

"Oh – sorry."

"Don't be." She replied, placing her hand on his cheek to keep his focus on her. Alice smiled, looking up at him. "I'd love for you to make me a dress. I can only imagine how beautiful it would be."

The Hatter broke out into a large smile then, and Alice noticed him quickly look behind her. He pulled her hand away from his cheek, although didn't let go of it, and turned around to pick up the basket he was preparing earlier with his free hand.

"Well, we can discuss everything about it over tea then!" He exclaimed, turning back to her, smile still prominent on his face. Alice looked confused for a moment, and turned her head slightly to look out the window, where she noticed that the rain had now passed. He had been right after all; the shower didn't last long at all.

And so the two of them walked out of the small house together. Alice found herself being pulled along by the Hatter, who still had a clasp of her hand and was now engaged in a long conversation about his ideas for her new fairy tale dress. Alice still felt a grin on her face. She couldn't remember a time in which she had been happier, and decided for what felt the millionth time in her mind that was so very glad she stayed behind, if only to spend more time with the very person who was holding her hand at that moment in time.
The two of them made it to the tea party in hardly no time at all, the Hatter still merged in his deep conversation about dresses and fairy tales as they went about their journey. Alice couldn't help but hold the content smile that was written on her face, often chipping in at times to the conversation whenever her friend asked her a question. Who would have thought that his wonder over stories would spark such a reaction? On the other hand, Alice knew that he was creative – so she honestly should not have been surprised that he’d gain inspiration in such a way.

When they reached the tea party, Alice noticed that all the regular attendees to such an event had already arrived, and – to no surprise – were already enjoying what was probably their third cup of tea. She saw the March Hare look up, twitching as he noticed the two of them appear. He grabbed a nearby cup, which was already very much a wreck – and decided to throw it in their direction.

"You're late for tea!!" He shouted as he did so.

The cup missed Alice, and the Hatter dodged before it managed to hit him. Seemingly unaffected by the whole situation, he continued to walk over to his regular seat, whilst at the same time replying to his friends actions.

"A Hatter is never late, Thackery. Nor is he early. He in fact, arrives precisely whenever he means to."

The March Hare – or Thackery as Alice had learnt his real name to be – laughed manically then, bouncing up and down in his seat as both she and the Hatter took their places at the table. Alice turned to look around the table, and smiled at Chessur and Mallymkun, earning a rather large grin from Chessur, and a disapproving look from Mally in return.

"Late late, you're late again!" Thackery continued to chant whilst laughing and looking around the table in search of something.

Alice noticed the Hatter pull out the basket he was packing from earlier, and he removed the lid that was on top of it. There, inside, she noticed that there were a great many number of variations in cake. She looked in awe at the rainbow of colours that she was now face to face with. Of course, she had seen how much the group usually had laid about the table from the previous tea parties she had attended, but there was something about viewing them in the basket that fascinated her.

Noticing her awed expression, the Hatter took out a pink cake, and passed it to Alice, a smile on his face as he did so.

"Thank you," Alice replied, taking the cake from his hands and smiling herself. It was only then
that she realised just how hungry she really was.

"Hurry up and share some of those cakes with the rest of us, Tarrant. Some of us are rather hungry 
you know." Came the voice of Chessur from the other end of the table.

"Yes yes, you'll get your cake. Just be patient." The Hatter replied, already placing some on the 
table as he spoke.

"We've already been patient for long enough. Do you know how long we waited for the two of 
you to show up?"

Alice noticed the Hatter glare at Chessur for a moment, but then proceeded to remove the rest of 
the cakes from the basket. Surely they hadn't been waiting outside in the rain for the two of them, 
had they? Well, knowing them for who they were – Alice wouldn't have been surprised if they 
had done that very thing.

"There!" Came the Hatters voice once all the cake had been laid on the table. Alice looked at the 
various selection, still in awe about the amount of colour there was. She then took a bite into her 
own cake, and was pleasantly surprised about how good it tasted.

"Cake, cake! Tea and cake!" Thackery celebrated, scanning the various selection for a second and 
then choosing the two that looked most appealing to him. Obviously, he had been more concerned 
of the lack of food on the table, then the fact that Alice and Hatter were apparently 'late' to the 
event at all.

"Calm down Thackery! The cake isn't going anywhere!" Mally said as she was walking across 
the table in search of her own cake.

"The rate that he's eating it right now, the cake won't last long anyway," Chessur replied as he 
looked into his cup at the remaining tea leaves.

The Hatter picked up the nearest teapot to them, and began pouring some tea for both he and 
Alice. She smiled yet again, and began looking around the table for wherever the sugar was 
buried underneath the various cutlery and cups.

"Alice told me the most fascinating thing earlier," The Hatter said, whilst continuing to pour the 
tea. "You wouldn't believe the sorts of things the stories in her world tell!"

"Sugar!" Thackery shouted randomly, noticing what Alice was in search for around the table.

"Why, thank you Thackery."

Instead of passing it to her however, Thackery had a better idea. He took two sugar cubes out of 
the sugar pot that was closest to him, and decided to once again, throw them across the table to 
Alice. Alice was however, very much prepared for such an action from him and managed to catch 
them before they hit the ground. Thanking him again, she put the cubes in her tea, picked up a 
nearby spoon and began to stir her tea.

Thackery remained bouncing and laughing in his chair, probably celebrating the fact that Alice 
had managed to catch them most magnificently. He then picked up another cake and quickly ate it.

"Well anyway –" Hatter began after watching the whole scenario between Alice and Thackery 
unfold. "Alice mentioned that in one of the stories from the otherworld, there was a house that was 
made completely out of cake!"

"Cake ye say?!" Thackery replied, pulling his long ears down over his head as he did so. "A
Alice wanted to laugh then. She thought the Hatters reactions to fairy tales was funny, she never expected or even thought about the Hare's when given the prospect of a house made of cake. Of course, Alice wasn't sure if she wanted to know what Thackery was thinking about the whole thing at that moment in time – he was probably trying to get his mind around the whole idea – but it was still an amusing site to see him get even more energetic about.

"Why yes!" Alice replied, sensing that the Hatter was urging her to continue her story from earlier. "A house that's made of cake, and gingerbread, and other various sweet foods."

Thackery pulled his ears even more at the description, the whole idea of a house made of sweet foods obviously making his mind spin in a hundred different ways.

"What an interesting thing you two bring up there! Although, now I wouldn't be at all shocked if Thackery decides he wants to somehow build his own house out of such materials." Chessur commented, grin still very much prominent on his face.

At Chessur's reply, Mally quickly grabbed another cake from off the table and began eating it before Thackery was given an opportunity to make even more of a mess of the place.

"House out of cake indeed! If he is indeed considering such a prospect, then I will eat my cake before he gets a chance to add them to his 'house'."

Alice watched as Mally tried to save her cake from Thackery, and she took a sip of her own tea then. She wasn't surprised. In actual fact knowing Alice's luck she'd turn up at a tea party one day and find that the Hare had made a small home for himself out of their food. Just thinking of the idea gave Alice reason enough to believe that perhaps, it was probably a good idea that the Hatter was left in charge with sorting out the food and that it was not Thackery's job.

"Oh you two don't be silly! He'd have much more fun eating the cake then crafting out of it."

Hatter replied, also sipping his own tea then.

"Perhaps we should change the topic before we inadvertently give him such an idea." Chessur paused, turning to look at Alice then. "Which reminds me. Nivens was searching for you Alice. He said that if we were to see you, we should inform you that the Queen wishes to speak to you when you return to the castle."

"Wishes to speak to me? Do you know what she wishes to speak to me about by any chance?"

Alice replied, confusion written on her brow as she put her teacup down on the table.

"No. He didn't say much more than that. Nivens scurried off to look for you himself afterwards."

"How strange."

Alice watched Chessur as he fiddled with a spoon on the table, wondering in her mind about what possible things the Queen could want to speak to her about. Noticing her expression, the Hatter put his hand on top of where Alice's lay on the table, hoping to reassure her in some way.

"It's probably nothing to worry about, Alice. If anything, she probably just wants to have a conversation with you. After all, it is of no surprise to anyone that you are her favourite person within her court."

Alice thought about what the Hatter said then, knowing that he was more than likely right. She sighed and smiled slightly, turning to look at him then.
"Yes, you're right."

"Good," he replied, smiling himself then. "If it'll make you feel any better, I will escort you back to the castle later. I've be meaning to talk to her myself anyway about something."

Her smile grew then, knowing that if her friend did escort her to the palace, she'd be a lot happier than if she were going by herself. But also, Alice knew that the Hatter probably wouldn't let her leave without him, seeing as how he'd escorted her back many a times when he'd been showing her around various places within Underland.

"Yes, I'd like that."

The tea party continued on then, still full of the same madness that had begun previously as the small group of friends chatted and shared their laughter with one another as they usually did. At one point, the March Hare broke out into song of 'a very happy un-birthday', to which the Hatter replied ecstatically to, commenting on how it had been a long time since they had ever sang it at a tea party. As they all broke into song, Alice remembered back to the time of her first visit, and how they had sung the same song joyfully back then as well. Another memory that convinced Alice that the place she was in now was most defiantly not a dream world.

When they were out of both tea and cake, Alice and the Hatter decided to call the tea party to an end, the Hatter promising that they would continue the festivities once again the next time, a promise that they all knew he was very good at keeping. When Alice was standing up on her feet, he offered his free arm to her (his other carrying the basket he had brought with them) –of which she happily took. Then, the both of them continued to walk away, bidding their friends a fairfarren and leaving them to their manic behaviour once again.

Alice enjoyed the walk back to the castle, listening to her friend's tales and stories once again. Quite often he would comment on the dress he was planning in his mind to make for her. He hardly told her anything definite about it, other than repeating time and time again that she would be free to pick both the fabric and the colours, but that the style itself would remain a surprise till the right moment. Alice didn't mind of course, even if curiosity often did get the better of her. But, she had absolute faith that whatever her talented friend would make for her, she would surely end up loving it.

As they continued to walk, a question fell in Alice's mind – one of which she had often thought of, but never got around to asking. She stopped walking for a second, the Hatter stopping also, giving her a questioning look as he did so.

"Hatter, I – I wonder if you could answer something for me."

"Well, the past has proven that I most likely can. What is it you wish to know Alice?"

Alice turned around so that she was facing her friend then, noticing his expression as she did so.

"Well, I noticed it a while ago to be honest but – it's only now that I remember to ask about it." She paused then, as if trying to work the best way to ask the question that was currently swimming in her mind. "Hatter; why does Chessur call you Tarrant?"

A moment's silence and Alice watched his expression change to one of slight surprise. He looked around for a second, and then replied to her answer as if it had the simplest answer in the whole entire world.

"Why, because it is my name."

Alice blinked, then furrowed her brow in confusion.
"Your name? You, never told me it was your name before."

"Well, I didn't think it was that important, to be truthful. And, you never really asked either. Not many people call me it; even Chessur only uses it some of the time. Being called 'Hatter' was just much more ... natural, I suppose. No one's really called me Tarrant since my family were alive."

Alice thought for a moment then. True, in all her time since being in Underland she could not recall a moment in which she had asked him for his real name, and had in fact taken to assume that 'Hatter' was his name. Or his preferred title at least. But as she thought about it then, Alice considered that of course that wouldn't be his name. She felt slightly foolish for believing it was, and part of her wished she would have asked what his name was much sooner.

"O-oh," She replied, not knowing much what to say to his answer. What could she say, really? She wasn't even sure if Hatter preferred to be called by his real name, or if he had grown so accustomed to his title, that he'd much rather forget the name 'Tarrant' completely. Judging from that, Alice felt it would be much better to simply ask him himself.

"So, another question. Would you mind if I called you Tarrant, or would you prefer me to stick with what I usually call you?"

She watched a smile appear on his face then, and knew instantly that she had asked the right question.

"From you, dear Alice? Both sound just as lovely. It is, entirely up to you what you call me, for I do not mind in the slightest."

And at that, Alice felt a smile creep its way onto her face as well. For once again – and for what felt like a million times since she had decided to stay in Underland - Alice felt that she slowly; but surely, learning more and more about the man.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is slightly late in being uploaded, but that is what vacations away without a laptop will lead to! I think this chapter was the beginning of when I started inserting little quotes here and there from other areas of pop culture. Back on fanfiction.net when this story was first uploaded, it became a fun game of 'find the quote'. But before anyone is worried, all the quotes were small, one liners, nothing more.
A Royal Visit

Chapter Summary

At the end of it all, Alice had the choice to leave or the choice to stay in Underland. But what happens after her decision is made?

When Alice and the Hatter arrived at the White Queens castle, they were both warmly greeted by their friend's welcoming smile, arms outstretched in a way of welcoming the two of them. Alice always felt comfortable in the presence of the woman who was in front of them - almost as comfortable as she was around the Hatter – and she felt it had something to do with the woman's kindness.

"Alice! Hatter! How nice it is to see the two of you!" She exclaimed, her smile only growing. Alice then fell into a curtsey before the woman, noticing out of the corner of her eye that the Hatter had also gone to bow himself.

"Your Majesty," the two of them spoke in union.

The Queen however, sighed and put her hands on her hips, watching the two of them before her. Alice turned her head slightly so that she could see the expression on her face, and saw that it carried a small ounce of annoyance within it.

"Oh honestly, you two. When will you ever listen to me? Time and time again I have informed you that the neither of you have to act so formal in front of me, and yet you still do! We are all friends are we not? You two do not have to bow, nor do you have to refer to me by my title. You may both call me Mirana."

Both Alice and the Hatter moved to stand up straight then. Of course, Mirana had mentioned it before – but Alice couldn't help but fall for the same procedure all the time. After all, had she been back in London and faced with royalty there, she would have most definitely been expected to show such manners. Remembering what the three of them had been through however, such as the whole ordeal with the Jabberwocky and the Red Queen, Alice could understand her friend's reasoning, and was rather grateful that she treated the two of them as friends.

"Of course. I'm sorry, I forgot," She replied, deciding to keep to honesty once again.

"Yes yes, just don't forget it again, the both of you. Otherwise I'll refer to you both as Mr Hightopp and Miss Kingsley, and I really don't want to have to do that." Mirana said; a look of disgust evident on her face at just the thought of acting so formal towards them.

"I – heard you wanted to speak to me about something?" Alice found herself asking, wanting nothing but to divert from the conversation they were currently locked in. In her mind, Alice made a mental note to refer to her friend by name in future – so as to avoid such a discussion again.

Mirana's face changed from its look of disgust to one of happiness once again, a smile reappearing.

"Oh yes! I would have waited for you to return, but then I wasn't sure if you'd get my message in
time or not. Which is why I sent Nivens to search for you."She turned then, indicating that they should join her in the room behind her. "Come, let us sit and talk in here."

Alice was about to begin to walk, when she felt the Hatter shuffle beside her.

"Perhaps I should wait out here while the two of you talk." He said, obviously not wanting to intrude on whatever it was Mirana had to share with Alice.

At that reply however, Mirana turned around sharply to look at the both them, her expression slightly shocked.

"Heavens no! You're welcome to join us too. After all, you'll probably learn of what I wish to share sooner or later, you might as well hear it now."

And so Mirana turned around again and proceeded to walk into the room. Alice and the Hatter exchanged a glance, both their expressions full of wonder at what it was that their friend had to share. After a moment of standing there, Alice took his hand and followed after Mirana, pulling the Hatter with her as she went.

When the two of them entered the room, they found that they were in a rather large seating area. Before them was a small select number of – what appeared to be – very comfortable chairs, just enough arranged for them to sit and talk. The room, just as the person was who owned it, was very inviting, and Alice only felt even more at home as she entered. Of course, considering she was currently using the castle as a place of residence for her time spent in Underland, Alice knew that she would feel comfortable in such an area.

She turned to face where the Queen was, and noticed that she had taken a seat in one of the chairs that were available. Meeting her gaze, Mirana offered the other seats to the two of them, gesturing for them to sit down with her.

"Please, sit and make yourselves comfortable."

Alice removed her grasp from her friends hand and did as she was told, sitting in a creamy white chair that was available to her. The Hatter sat in the available chair next to her, and Alice noticed the warm smile the Queen gave the two of them out of the corner of her eye. A silent moment passed for them all to get comfortable, and then, Mirana spoke up once again.

"So, I guess you're wondering what it is I wanted to talk to you about, yes?" She asked, looking at them with the smile still on her face.

"Yes actually," Alice replied as she felt herself nodding in agreement. Her friends smile only grew slightly at her hidden secret, and Alice felt that as it did so, so did her own curiosity over the meeting they were currently having.

"Well, it is no big secret or task – so you shouldn't worry yourself. In fact, it was really a very simple reason why I asked for you." Mirana paused, looking back at the two of them. Sensing there was no objection, she continued on. "In a few weeks time, I will be holding a celebratory ball. Here. In the castle. I thought that as you are currently living here, you would like to know about it before it becomes widespread knowledge."

Alice blinked. All she was brought forward for discussion for was because the Queen was holding a ball? As much as she was glad to be informed about it – Alice could hardly see any reason why she would mind. After all, she was beginning to understand what these celebratory events meant to the people in Underland and how important they were, as she recalled from the celebration that was held after she defeated the Jabberwocky. Still, Alice couldn't help but feel that that wasn't the
only reason why her friend wanted to talk to her, and that she was about to find out the other part of her story.

"A celebration? Why, that sounds lovely! But, forgive me – for I am not sure why you felt you had to discuss this with me."

Mirana only laughed then, as if expecting Alice's reply. Alice however, was only even more confused. She turned to look at the Hatter then, blinking as she did so, and noticed that his expression was – well, was normal for him really. Was she the only one that was confused?

"Oh Alice, there is more about the occasion that I want to discuss with you!"

Ah. So, now would be the rest of the explanation as to the meeting. She expected that much. Alice turned back to face Mirana as she continued talking.

"You see, it is a most joyous occasion indeed that we will be celebrating. One of our most celebrated holidays in fact. And well, I suppose the real reason I wished to discuss it with you now is, because I wish to ask you if you'll be a guest of honour to such an event."

Alice felt herself blink then. Her? A guest of honour? Why, whatever for?

"Guest of honour?" She questioned, the confusion she was currently feeling once again evident within her voice.

"Why of course! It is of no surprise that most of us in Underland adore you Alice, and that a great many of us are grateful for all you've done for our world. To have you as a guest of honour at such an event, why, it would please us greatly. And you do deserve it. Consider it as our way of saying thank you for all you've done for us."

Alice was stunned. She didn't know what to say. How far could her friend's generosity extend? Her? A guest of honour at a celebratory ball? Never in her dreams had she ever considered such a proposition would be made in front of her.

As if taking her reaction as a bad one, the Queen's face fell slightly. Her smile was replaced with a look of worry, as if she had said something wrong, or something to somehow offend the girl.

"You – do not wish of being such?" She asked.

Alice broke out of her stunned daze then, looking back at the Queen once again.

"No! No, it's nothing like that it's just –" She paused, as if trying to form the correct words for her reply in her mind. "It's just, I – never would have expected such an honour, your majesty- I mean, Mirana."

"So is it a yes then?"

Alice paused again slightly, and nodded.

"Yes. I would be honoured to."

"Excellent!" Mirana said, clapping her hands together, the smile she held previously returning to her face once again. "I'm sure everyone will be more than happy to see you there!"

Alice nodded, and smiled sheepishly. She turned to look at the Hatter once again, noticing that he was looking back at her with a grin on his face too. Well, it seemed that she had made the right decision, judging by her friend's elated expressions.
Mirana turned to face the Hatter then, still smiling.

"I take it you are here about my proposition to you as well?"

The Hatter turned to look at Mirana then, nodding as she did so.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I am."

Just then, Alice felt her stomach grumble. Well, she thought she felt it. It turned out she more, heard it. And not only had she, but her friends also. Embarrassed, she tried to avoid their stares at her and her talking stomach. Both of them however burst into laughter at such a thing, and Alice felt her embarrassment only grow even more.

"Oh Alice, has the Hatter not fed you properly today?" She heard Mirana say, chuckling as she did so. "Why don't you go down to the kitchens and find something to eat?"

Alice turned to look at her friends then, and was met by both of their warm smiles. Well, she was very hungry – even if she didn't really want to admit it. After hesitating for a moment she nodded, and got up to leave the room – and to leave the two of them to discuss whatever it was the Hatter had come to discuss with the Queen.

As Alice walked down the hallway to where the kitchen was located, she couldn't help but think about all that had happened in her day, and the events which had happened since she had decided to remain in Underland. Since she decided to stay, not one day disappointed her, and she was constantly met with new, thrilling adventures and scenes that decided to appear before her. Her friends had been nothing more than welcoming to her, and Alice was very glad to have met all of them.

She walked into the kitchen and, noticing that no one was there at the time being, proceeded to make herself a sandwich with what ingredients were lying around. As she did so, her mind continued to go on thinking about how honestly happy she was with her life now. How she felt that she finally belonged somewhere, and that she was no longer being constantly judged for being slightly different from others around her. Often, her mind would fall unto one person in particular – that being her best friend, the Hatter.

No matter what had happened, he had always been there for her. Had she needed help, he was there in a heartbeat to help her. Alice couldn't count the amount of times he'd saved her when they tried to claim Mirana's throne back. How it had been him who was a hundred percent sure that she was, indeed the Alice they needed, the Alice they wanted, and how he continued to stand by her, even when all others thought otherwise. It had been the Hatter that had helped her find her lost muchness, allowing her to return back to the Alice that everyone had been searching so hard for. And that's not to mention all he'd done for her since. Since Alice had decided to remain in Underland, and when she had decided she wanted to learn more about the world she loved so much, it had been the Hatter who was once again, more than happy to be her friend, teacher and guide through it all. He often took her to places that he thought she'd love, or tell her interesting facts about the land – and Alice was never disappointed by what he had to offer her. Since she had stayed, she felt that she was beginning to get to know the man even more, and that made her happy. Happy that she was able to have the time to be with him and to understand him more and more for whom he was on the inside, and not just know him by his title, or by what others said of him.

"Don't feed you properly indeed. It's not my fault Thackery stole most of the cake."

Alice smiled, and turned to find the Hatter standing in the doorway. She looked over at her sandwich, now complete – and then looked back to find him walking towards her.
"Well, your discussion with Mirana was quick!" Alice replied.

"Indeed it was." He stopped walking when he was in front of her, and looked over at the sandwich she had made. Alice knew that he was judging the job she had done of making her snack, and so whilst he wasn't looking she rolled her eyes.

"What did you two talk about?"

"Hmm?" The Hatter replied, looking back from the sandwich to Alice again. Alice noticed confusion fall on his face again for a second, but was replaced by understanding shortly after – as if only just realising what she had asked him. "Oh! Nothing much really. Only, she offered me my job back in the castle, and well – I decided to take it."

Alice looked up at him them, happiness beaming from her eyes at what he had told her.

"Why, but that's wonderful! You can now continue working on what you love the most!"

Noticing her expression, the Hatter broke into a large smile himself then. Alice could only but imagine what having his job back would mean to him. Knowing all too well how much he loved working on creating things; she only knew that he must have been completely ecstatic over the idea.

"It is rather isn't it? I already have so many ideas of things to make. I should probably sketch them down before I forget. A number of hats and various other things. Yes, a great many ideas. Oh, and of course there's your dress too, which I can't wait to get started on. We really need to discuss what you want done with that you know? I guess I should get to moving some of my fabric and equipment over here soon ..."

Alice watched as the Hatter went into one of his rambling modes again. Judging by how happy he was, she didn't have to heart to break him out of it. To see him, completely and utterly happy and in his element of creativity – well, it only made her ever happier to witness such a thing.

So as he continued to discuss his future plans for god knows how many things he had planned to create within his mind, Alice made another sandwich. Not for her, but for him. After all, she had a feeling that the two of them would be stuck in this conversation for a rather long time. Not that she minded. No, she didn't mind at all. In fact, she couldn't remember when she had ever been happier.
A few days had passed since Alice's discussion with the Queen, and she was currently in the Hatters new dressroom which was located in the castle. She sat in a chair and watched as her friend rushed around.

The dressroom was, well, a mess in all honesty. But Alice knew that the reason why it was in such a state was for two reasons. Number one, the Hatter was still in the process of moving things into the room itself, leaving in his trail a rainbow of different types and colours of fabric, so many shades that even Alice wouldn't have believed they had existed had she not been witness to them. And secondly, Alice knew that what she would count as 'mess' her friend would call 'creative atmosphere', and she had neither the time nor the heart to complain about it.

Noticing a varied number of sketches lying around, Alice frowned. For some reason, he still wouldn't let her see or have any idea what the design of her dress was, and Alice's own curiosity over the whole thing was beginning to grow.

"Tarrant," She began, and watched as her friend paused what it was he was doing at his desk.

"So you've decided to use my name now?" He asked, and then continued to search about the table for whatever it was he was looking for beforehand.

"Well, I did say I would, if you didn't mind. But when I actually thought about it – I wondered if it would be strange for me to suddenly start calling you by your name in public. So, I've decided to refer to you by both title and name, that is, unless you've decided you'd much prefer to be called Hatter all the time?"

"Alice, I have already told you that I do not mind what name you decide to call me by, and that decision hasn't changed from the last time we spoke about it. I suppose I just didn't expect you to actually use it, not that I mind in the slightest."

"You're doing it again." Alice interjected as she sensed him begin to enter rambling territory.

"Doing what?"

"Rambling."

"Oh. Sorry."

Silence passed the two of them for a few moments, well, apart from the sounds of the Hatter scurrying through boxes to try and find what it was he was in search of. Alice, finally understanding for sure this time that he honestly, truly showed no preference in what she addressed him by, smiled to herself. She wasn't sure why, but being able to know her friends real name - and even more being able to actually address him by it some of the time – made her feel joyful inside. Who would have thought that such a simple, small thing such as ones name could make their friendship seem even stronger than it already was?

"Anyway, that wasn't what I wanted to ask you," Alice spoke up after a moment, shaking her head as she did so. "What I was going to ask you however, is why I can't know the design to my dress?"

The Hatter turned to look at her then, his face filled with surprise, as if the reason why should be as simple as daylight. Noting by Alice's expression that she was, in fact, completely oblivious as to the reason why, he then answered her.
"Why Alice, for such a simple question there is an equally simple reason. I would have thought you would have known why."

Again they looked at one another and again, Alice still couldn't understand the reason why. Knowing that Alice wasn't going to understand anytime soon, the Hatter sighed.

"If you know the design now, then it's hardly any surprise later on, is it? After all, everyone knows that the best type of gifts often come as some sort of surprise, yes?"

Alice just continued to stare in confusion then. Since when had her dress been a secret and – when had it been a surprise? In fact, if it was any type of surprise at all, surely then he wouldn't have even told her about the idea in the first place. Seeing a scrap of paper next to the Hatter on the desk, Alice took to assume that that was what held the design to her dress.

"Well, can't I even take one small peak at the design? After all, it'll be different on paper then when it's actually made, will it not? So even if you did show me it now, it would still be a surprise."

The Hatter's expression grew shocked again, as if the whole prospect that Alice was proposing was utterly ridiculous.

"Absolutely not! Alice dear, you really need to learn how to wait. You're beginning to grow more curious than that bloody cat. And besides, who's to say that what's on paper is what the final product will be?"

"Then I should be allowed to look at it, considering you could always alter or change the design when you start making it."

"And there is always the possibility that the dress will look identical to what it does on the paper if I choose not to change or alter anything to it. Alice, you will have to wait. The answer, is no."

Alice, knowing there wasn't any possible way for her to win the current debate she was having, sighed and crossed her arms. Sometimes, the man was just impossible. His reasoning on the matter made very little sense to her, and after all, all she really wanted was to take one, small peak at the design. How was she to know what colour she wanted when she didn't even know what the dress style would look like?

Lost in her own thoughts, Alice didn't even notice that the Hatter had returned to his task of looking for something, and it wasn't until he next spoke that she realised that he had in fact found it.

"Ah! There you are! Hiding away in another box were we?" The Hatter turned and caught Alice's expression, her eyebrow raised slightly as he proceeded to talk to the object in his hand. Of course, she didn't want to assume it was inanimate, as she had done that many a time since her stay in Underland, and later learnt that in actual fact, the items were in their own way, alive. She honestly wouldn't be surprised if whatever her friend was talking to would actually reply to him.

Still, she caught the Hatter's signature smile, and after he was standing straight again watched as he beckoned her over.

"Come here Alice, you're needed."

Without saying anything in reply, Alice got up from where she was seated and preceded to walk over to where he was. As she reached the table however, she quickly glanced, looking for the piece of paper she saw only moments before. However, she noticed that it had disappeared, and
could only assume that the Hatter had known she was looking at it and had decided to hide it. She frowned; sometimes that man was a lot more sneaky and clever then he let others know him for.

"Now Alice, if you want your dress to fit you properly, you will have to allow me to take your measurements —" Alice noticed then that the object in which he had previously been talking to was, in fact some measuring tape. "Of course, I could make the dress without them – seeing as you are very much the correct Alice size, but if I did that, then there is always the possibility that the dress would be either too big, or much too small. And we don't want that do we?"

Alice almost found herself laughing at her friends rambling again. Instead of interrupting him, she decided to wait until he was finished, and nodded for him to continue and take the measurements. After all, a dress that didn't even fit would not be a good thing, especially after all the work that he would have put in to making it.

A few moments passed, and the Hatter continued to take measurements and note them down on a scrap piece of paper, and then take more measurements and repeat the same procedure. At times, Alice was sure she sensed him hesitating slightly, and she almost wanted to chuckle. Of course he'd be slightly nervous over taking something such as her measurements; he was a gentleman after all.

After all the measurements had been taken, the Hatter looked at Alice again and smiled. Alice felt herself smiling straight back, the annoyance from earlier gone completely from her mind. He turned to put the measuring tape away and put the paper somewhere safe on his desk, and without turning around began to speak.

"If you wish, you can pick what fabric and colours you want me to use."

Alice blinked, and looked around at the mess of the room again. Oh, but where would she even start with the searching? It was like a rainbow in the room!

"Really?" She replied, still looking around in awe. Something within her told Alice that the mixture she saw around her now was not all of her friend's massive collection in colours; and that in fact, there was a lot more hidden back in his house.

"Of course!" The Hatter turned around again, and saw Alice still awestruck at the colour around her. "There are plenty of colours to choose from; let's see, here we've got red, purple, pink, ruby, banana, apricot, cerulean, jazzberry jam, dandelion, magneta, razzmatazz, bubblegum—"

"Wait, how can you have a bubblegum colour? What colour even is that? Surely bubblegum comes in various colours?"

It was the Hatter's turn to blink then. After he did so, he stared at Alice in confusion.

"No, bubblegum is very much a colour."

"I don't believe that. Bubblegum comes in different colours, it could be blue or it could be pink."

"Yes, but the colour itself is pink. Look," Alice watched as he rushed to one side of the room, threw a few pieces of fabric away behind him, and picked up the one he was looking for. He held it up so that Alice could see it. "See? It's pink. But paler. Bubblegum."

"Well what an odd name for a colour!" She replied. In all honesty, Alice had never been good at knowing the various names different colours had. Of course, there were the obvious – red, blue, green – and so on, but when it came to names such as 'bubblegum' and 'jazzberry jam', she was lost. And of course, when the Hatter suggested she pick out what colour she wanted for her dress, he would include all the various random names for various shades, wouldn't he? Suddenly, Alice
sensed that picking a colour was going to be much more difficult then she originally considered.

She walked over to a pile, and began looking through the colours. Honestly, where did she start? They were all very pretty colours, and would all make a fine dress in their own way. Alice had no idea where to begin.

After a moment, she picked up a shade of yellow, and looked at it. It was a rather nice shade, and it reminded her of sunny days. Yes, it would probably make a lovely colour for her dress. And it made a change from her normal choice in the colours of which she wore.

"What about this, Tarrant?" She asked.

Hearing his name called, the Hatter walked over to Alice and was by her side in no time to see what colour she had picked. Looking at the colour however, Alice saw his face fell slightly, as if disappointed by her choice.

"Oh no Alice, no this simply won't do."

Confused, she looked back at the colour, as if trying to find the fault in it.

"Erm, what may I ask is wrong with the colour?"

"Oh nothing's wrong with the colour. Heavens no! It's just – this is for your fairy tale dress, is it not?"

Confusion setting in even more, Alice nodded slowly to reply.

"Well – yes, that's what I thought it was for at least."

"Precisely. And because it is so, it has to be special and represent you. And I'm afraid Alice dear, this colour doesn't do either – not to mention one of the women in your 'fairy stories' already took the colour yellow as their trademark."

Alice was speechless. So, she couldn't use the yellow – because someone – a someone who was entirely made up at that - had already used that colour in their own dress? How utterly ridiculous! Still, not wanting to anger or upset her friend, Alice put the fabric to one side, and decided to pick up another colour.

"Okay, what about this then?"

The Hatters face creased up into what was, most definitely, one of disgust then.

"Oh most definitely not! That doesn't reflect you in the slightest!"

"Alright ..." Alice looked around her, starting to feel slightly annoyed at the mans objections. Again, she picked up another possible colour candidate. "How's this?"

"No, pick another."

Again, she picked up another colour she liked, and trying to hide how frustrated she was feeling right then, spoke once again.

"... This. One?"

"Don't like it in the slightest."

Alice threw the fabric down unto the pile then, looking back at the Hatter sharply at his ever so
"Just who is this dress for?! Me or you?"

The Hatter fell back slightly then, as if taken by surprise at Alice's outburst. Well, what did he expect? He was in one of 'those' moods, those moods being the type that obviously wanted to see how much they could annoy Alice. And Alice herself was in the mood where she couldn't handle such annoyance from him.

"Why Alice, for you obviously. Why on earth would I be designing a dress for myself? And if - for some unfathomable reason I was designing a dress for myself - why would I take your measurements if it was intended for me? Dear, you really are being most silly right now."

"Tarrant, forgive me if I sound – childish –" Alice couldn't understand why she was asking for forgiveness over her acting childish when it was the other way around from her point of view, but – still. It was either that or to continue arguing until he got annoyed, which she really did not want to see. Or put up with for that matter. "But, if it's my dress, why am I not allowed to choose my own colour for it?"

"Oh you're more than welcome to choose your own colour for it, of course you are! I just – figured you might want some advice. Especially seeing as you complained so much about wanting to see the design. I can however, shush if you'd prefer?"

Alice looked at him then, and noticed that he was indeed, telling the truth. And she couldn't help but smile slightly. Sure, he was being most annoying at that moment in time, but Alice could tell in his expression that he was doing it with the truest and most well implied of intentions. At such a thing, Alice only wondered how she could deny his advice, or get mad at him.

"Oh you don't have to do that, Tarrant. I'm sorry. We'll just, carry on searching through these colours until we find the perfect one. Together. Is that alright?"

She watched him smile then, and they proceeded to search through the colours together.

"What about this one?" She asked after a few minutes, holding up a piece of pink coloured fabric.

"Alice have you not been listening to anything I've said? This dress is meant to reflect you, not someone else."

Alice sighed. Perhaps this was going to take even longer than she thought it originally would. There were too many colours to choose from as it was, and it seemed that no matter what she picked, her friend would always find some fault in her choice. Even if he was doing it out of good intentions, it still didn't stop those intentions from also being rather annoying all the same.

Then she saw it. A perfect, beautiful colour that caught her eye and made Alice wonder why she hadn't noticed it before. She blinked, and went to pick it up. It was beautiful, or at least she thought it was. She turned around to find the Hatter – who was also searching through various colours himself now – and when she noticed where he was, called to him.

"Tarrant, how about this?"

He looked over to her, and noticed the colour fabric she was holding up. Alice noticed his smile grow then, and she instantly knew she'd made the correct decision finally.

"It's perfect! See? I knew you'd find the perfect colour eventually."

She rolled her eyes and smiled herself, partly wondering if this whole task was so she would find
a colour in which he wanted to use for her dress, and that in actual fact, it really wasn't much her
decision at all. Still, she really did love the colour – and was surprised on how it had not caught
her attention before. Sighing slightly, she replied.

"Good, I'm glad we've found a colour that we both agree on."

Still smiling, the Hatter walked over to her. He leant over, just so his face was level with her ear,
and whispered something to her.

"Now, shall we get to choosing what fabric to use?"

He pulled away, and Alice noticed his smile grow then. She sighed, the annoyance she was
feeling only moments before returning to her once again. Something within her gave her the
feeling that the two of them searching for fabric would be just as hard and irritating as it was for
them to pick one simple colour.

Really, who was the dress really for?
Alice shifted in her seat slightly, trying to get comfortable as her friend was talking to someone just outside the room. She had some idea as to what the conversation they were having was about. Why, it was probably relating to the same reason why she was in the room herself. Still, Alice continued to know very little about the holidays and events that happened in Underland – so she was secretly glad that she didn't have to put forward many ideas for the ball that was being held in just under a week, and that that task was left to many of the people that served the Queen.

Mirana finished her conversation with the person in the other room, and walked over to where Alice was. She smiled at her as she sat down, and Alice smiled back, reminded for what felt like the hundredth time of how kind and inviting her presence was to her.

"I'm sorry about that short interruption Alice," Mirana spoke as she picked up a nearby teapot and went to pour both herself and Alice a drink.

For a quick moment, Alice wondered to herself if that was all the people in Underland ever actually drunk, and tried to remember a time when she’d seen someone drinking something other than tea. She shook her head, and forgot the thought as quickly as it came to her, moving forward in her chair slightly so that she could put some sugar in her tea.

"It's not a problem Mirana, I would expect you to be busy; especially considering the preparations you have to make for the up and coming ball."

Alice picked up her small tea cup – she noticed that it was chequered both in blue and white colour as she did so, and wondered if it was picked out deliberately to match the dress of which she was wearing – and brought it to her lips to take a sip. To be truthful to herself, Alice still found it odd that she was to refer to the Queen by her name and not by her title. Of course, she considered her a very good friend, but she still couldn't stop the nagging feeling within her that kept telling her that she should be referring to her by her title. Alice however took it as just another thing to get used to, and as she didn’t want to upset her friend, she continued to call her by her name and to try and avoid the slip ups of calling her 'her majesty'. In all honesty, she was honoured to be thought about in such high esteem from her.

"How are preparations coming along for it, now that we are on that topic?"

Alice saw her friends smile widen, and watched as she set her own teacup back down upon the table. Mirana looked over at Alice, nothing but excitement evident in her eyes.

"Oh things are going perfectly! I expect that it will be a most marvellous event for all; at least – I hope it will be so. It is true that we've put so much work into preparing for it, but at the end of the day it won't be a success unless those attending it enjoy it, will it not?"

"Of course! But I'm sure that it will be an enjoyable event, Mirana. After all, I can't see any reason why it shouldn't be as such."

That was another thing Alice had to find herself getting used to. One thing she'd noticed with the events that took place in Underland was that, most of the time, they were held for enjoyment. All those that attended seemed to have the most enjoyable of times, or so Alice had observed. It was very different from what she was used to back in London. Back in London, such events would be boring to her. Alice always felt that a reason for that was because such balls and social occasions were often held as a sign of high power status and money, and not based purely on having fun. From the few events Alice had had the pleasure of attending in Underland however, she knew that
such a thing didn't exist – or if it did, it was well masked. Also, the celebrations in Underland were actually enjoyable, and not tiresome. It was something that she almost didn't believe, and what shocked Alice most was how she looked forward to them. She was, of course, most excited for her friend's ball. A strange prospect, considering how against such things she would have been back home.

She continued to sip her tea as Mirana replied to her comment.

"It is nice of you to say so. I only hope the others feel the same way as you do. I'm most sure they will though, especially knowing that you are to be my guest of honour." She paused, taking a sip of her own tea once again and then resumed her conversation. "I know I tell you this time and time again, Alice, but you really must understand how much people value you being here. A lot of us feel indebted to you for what you have done for us. For you to attend such an event, it will make many people happy."

Alice smiled then, feeling slightly uncomfortable. No matter how many times she heard such things pass her friend's lips, she felt she would never believe the reality behind it all, nor would she know how to react to such compliments.

"Thank you," She merely replied, drinking some more tea in hope that they could turn the conversation slightly so it wasn't about her.

Mirana, who must have noticed her nervousness laughed; her smile still prominent on her face. "Oh Alice dear, there's no need to be so shy! I only speak the truth, you do realise?" A short silence passed over the two then, and Mirana continued to speak. "Perhaps we should leave this topic alone, if it makes you so uncomfortable, yes? Let's see ... oh yes! I do take it you already have your outfit planned for the ball? A special dress that you have planned to wear for such an occasion, perhaps? If not, I will be more than happy to help you find one."

Alice put her teacup back on the table, feeling herself blush slightly. Yes, she did have a dress – but she didn't exactly have it as of yet. And to be honest, truthfully she had no idea when it would be ready.

"Well, there is a dress I did think about wearing but – I don't even know if it'll be ready in time for the ball." She turned her face away from Mirana then, looking for something else to focus her attention on, trying to not make the fact that she was diverting her friends gaze to obvious, and that she was in fact just looking around the room around her, admiring the many things on display. "Hatter said he was making me a dress. However, the last time I heard anything about it, he was complaining about how he was indecisive over some design he wanted to incorporate into it."

Alice replayed her friend's previous ramblings over in her head, remembering how he had complained about a number of various ideas he had, but how he couldn't make a simple decision to settle on just one. Alice had been completely confounded by what he was saying, not entirely understanding all the things he was saying. She sensed however that he secretly knew how confused she was, and that was exactly why he had brought it up. For had she had any sense of knowing what styles he was talking about, he most probably wouldn't have mentioned it, worried he'd reveal what her dress would be like when it was finally finished.

Still stuck in her own thoughts, Alice nearly jumped when Mirana continued to speak.

"Oh? So the Hatter's making our dear Alice a dress now, is he?"

Alice turned and saw that on her face was a grin that could rival even Chessur's. Mirana sat back in her chair, helping herself to another cup of tea as she did so. She offered some to Alice, who
merely shook her head in response.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it Alice. If there is one thing I have learnt, it is that no matter how indecisive the Hatter is over his work at times, he always manages to finish his creations relatively quickly. It is true that he is a perfectionist in his trait, but if you'll have my opinion – I wouldn't be surprised if he was planning to have your dress finished in time for the ball."

Alice blinked then. Was it possible that he was planning that? It would make a lot of sense yes but, just how far had he got with it since the last time they'd spoke about it?

"I hope so. I really can't wait to see what it looks like," especially considering how mysterious he'd made the dress seem Alice thought to herself.

"Well, next time you see him, why don't you simply ask him about it?" Mirana replied, sipping yet more tea. "I'm sure if you asked him nicely, he'd tell you when he'd think he'll finish making it. When is it that you'll next be seeing him?"

"Oh, probably tomorrow sometime. He mentioned something about wanting to go outside for a while, so I suppose I'll be seeing him then."

"I see."

Alice tried not to notice her friends grin grow even more, instead focusing on the cake that was on the table. Helping herself to a small slice, Alice once again wondered if tea and cake were an all about tradition in Underland, or if it was just a coincidence that the Queen had some prepared for the two of them.

"Alice, forgive me for asking, or for even sounding rude; for that is not my intention but – what is the Hatter to you, truly?"

Alice almost choked on her cake at the sudden question then. She really, honestly should have seen the question coming, especially as the look in the woman's eyes was full of intrigue. However, she hadn't, and it had instead come as a shock to her. An out of the blue comment, as they would say.

"Why, he's my friend."

"Just a friend? Is that as far as it goes for you two?"

Alice hesitated for a moment – that and she was too busy trying to swallow what was left of the cake she was eating -, but then once she was settled somewhat, she replied quickly, almost defensively.

"Okay fine, best friend."

She watched as Mirana raised her eyebrow in a knowing way. Oh, Alice did not like the situation she was currently put under in that moment.

"W-what?" She asked, feeling her face burning at her friends stare.

"Oh – nothing really," Mirana replied, looking down to stir her tea, her smirk still written clearly on her face.

Alice frowned. Nothing really? Well, it was most obviously not nothing. She'd seen that kind of look that was lurking on her friends face before, and knew all too well what it meant. It was the gossiping look. The look that usually made Alice roll her eyes and sigh. But she wasn't doing that
in that moment in time. Instead, she was blushing. A lot. Alice Kingsley; was blushing. She
couldn't remember a time when she had last blushed, and – she most definitely did not have any
understanding as to why she was blushing now. Her friend on the other hand looked as if she had all
the answers she needed in such a small action.

"Hmm, perhaps it would help if I mentioned that you will require an escort to the ball. I take it,
you do have someone who will be there with you, am I right?"

Alice blinked yet again, her flushed face cooling slightly. An escort? That she hadn't known.
Instead, she had just assumed that because she was currently residing in the castle, she could go by
herself. At least, that was what she thought was going to happen. But now she was being told she
needed an escort?

"I – I didn't know that, having an escort was a requirement."

Mirana's expression looked slightly shocked then, and she learnt forward to look at Alice's
confused expression.

"Oh but of course it is! Especially so for you. Did you honestly expect me to allow my guest of
honour attend my ball without an escort? Surely not! I wouldn't hear of it."

As Alice thought about it then, she guessed that the woman's logic was, in fact sound. It would
after all, look improper for a guest of honour to attend such an event without an escort, as she had
learnt from such events that took place back in London. Even so, Alice had not given the idea
much thought. She was still very much a stranger to the land around her, and therefore did not
know many people, regardless if many of them knew her for what she'd done. Who would she ask
to go with her? She of course, could not ask someone she didn't know. Even if they did oblige,
Alice herself could not deal with feeling uncomfortable next to someone she hardly knew.

"I'm afraid I never gave it much thought, to be quite honest. I just assumed I'd be attending by
myself. I'm afraid I don't know who to ask."

There was a moment of silence, and Alice bit her lip then, trying to sort out the scenario in her
head. Sitting across from her however, Mirana had put on a mock look of concentration, as if she
was in heavy thought as to who Alice could ask to escort her to the ball. Alice began to wonder
why the idea had not occurred to her until now, and she couldn't help but feel slightly silly at not
seeing such a prospect as being a problem.

After what felt like an eternity in Alice’s mind, she heard her friend snap her fingers.

"I've got it."

Alice looked up then, to see that her friend was sitting up, alert, smile written back on her face.
She turned to face Alice, and Alice noticed that smile of hers grow slightly.

"Alice, I do believe I have thought of the perfect solution to your problem."

Alice only continued to look at her, as if urging her to continue with what her idea was.

"I must admit, the solution is simple, really. You; will ask the Hatter to be your escort."

Another moment's silence; and Alice blinked again. Had it not been for the previous conversation
the two had had about the man in question, Alice would have admired the idea, not even thinking
to question it. However, just the idea of how she had blushed at such questions left her very
confused about what had been asked. Could she honestly ask the Hatter – her most oldest and
most loyal friend – to be her escort for the ball? Such reasoning should have been enough
indication that yes, she easily could – however Alice was no longer sure.

"The Hatter? Forgive me Mirana but is that ... are you sure that would work? I mean, what if he said no, then what would happen?"

Deep down inside her, she knew she was making excuses – but Alice wasn't entirely sure why she was doing such a thing. Once again, Mirana looked sharply at her, shocked at what she had said.

"Heavens, why would he ever say no to you? If I am correct, the Hatter is the type of man who would not – nor could not say no to anything you ask, Alice. I'm sure, if you merely asked him the next time you see him – he would more than happy. After all, it is clear you will not accept an escort from someone you don't even know. And you only just admitted that you and the Hatter are indeed, very close friends –" Alice didn't like the way she put emphasis on 'very close' in her sentence, but tried to brush it off anyway. "- I cannot see nor think of any other plan that would work out as well as this one."

Alice hesitated, fidgeting in her chair. Of course, all the Queen had said was very much true, but – for some reason, Alice didn't know what to do. What she had just heard, she knew it was true, that her friends idea was the best one available to her and that the Hatter himself would be more than happy to escort her. And knowing Alice, if he did escort her, the ball would be just that much more enjoyable. After all, she often told herself how much more fun things were when she was with him.

Sighing, Alice gave in.

"Alright, I'll ask him tomorrow. You are very much right after all."

Mirana smiled even more, knowing all too well she had won the battle between both her and Alice.

"Of course I'm right. I'm the Queen after all. Just make sure you do ask him tomorrow."

She smiled at Alice, and Alice returned the smile right back at her.

The two of them went back to their conversation, talking about various things for a while. Alice's embarrassment was soon a thing of the past, and for the duration of the visit she found herself laughing, and giving some advice to the Queen she had known as her friend. They sat there, discussing things about the ball, like what kind of food they should serve, and what sort of dress Mirana should wear to her own event, as well as various other topics that sprung up.

When it was time for Alice to leave, she got up, and both of them bid each other goodbye. She walked towards the door to show herself out, when suddenly she heard Mirana call out from behind her.

"Oh and Alice! One more thing."

Wondering what it possibly could be her friend wanted to say to her, Alice turned around to face her from where she was standing. It was then that she saw it again, that grin that could rival Chessur's.

"I do suggest you re-think about what the Hatter means to you, and weather the two of you still stand as just good friends."

She watched the Queen wink and laugh then, waving her hand whilst wishing her a good remainder of the day. Confused, Alice turned and walked out of the room. She shut the door
behind her, and stood there for a moment, wondering what had just happened.

What was it the Queen had meant when she said that, exactly?
Alice couldn't help but be confused by a number of different things at that moment in time.

Number one, she was still trying to work out just what it was the Queen had meant by what she had said yesterday at her visit. Although Alice had somewhat taken the advice given to her, whenever she tried to think of what the Hatter meant to her, she only continued to be even more lost and bewildered about everything, and wished she could just stop thinking about the entire thing totally. She got very little sleep the previous night due to her non-stop thinking, and it was driving her insane.

Number two. Alice could not understand the anxious feeling she had within her at meeting the Hatter the previous morning. She couldn't fathom why such a thing worried her so much, especially considering how many times they had already been alone together. Silently, Alice felt she had Mirana to thank for her nervousness, especially with the way she had constantly poked her about what stood in their relationship.

And of course, there was a third reason to add to her confusion, was their not? And that was, the Hatter himself.

When he had told her the other day that he wanted to escape outside, Alice had assumed that that meant he wanted to partake in the usual tea party event with the rest of their friends. However, when she had asked him what they would be doing previously that morning, she got a very different answer. Well, she didn't get much of an answer at all, to be completely honest – all she received was his usual odd ways to divert the subject, to which he then added 'it's a secret' at the end of it.

So now, she was following her dear friend to lord knows where, without any inkling of what was going to happen. Alice only knew, that whatever he had planned – it had something to do with the basket he was carrying with him. And as he proceeded to carry on walking and talking a thousand different things at once, Alice found herself submerged in her own hundred and one confusing thoughts in her mind, once again trying to make sense of the entire situation she was currently stuck in.

However, as she was stuck in her own thoughts, the Hatter must have somehow noticed. For he had stopped walking for a moment, and when Alice looked up she saw he was staring at her, a look of concern on his face.

"Alice? Is everything quite alright?"

She forced a smile slightly, trying to bury the confusion she was currently trapped in. She, most definitely, did not want to discuss it with him. Of course, he would be nothing but a good listener to her problems, but some – if not the majority - of those problems concerned him. And – well, Alice partly feared that telling him some of the things in her mind that even she didn't understand might result in her frightening him. So instead, she lied.

"Oh, yes. Everything's fine. Why do you ask?"

A pause, and the Hatter walked towards her slightly, his eyes never leaving her face, as if searching for something. Alice wouldn't have been surprised if he knew she was lying; for he honestly knew her too well sometimes. However, if he did – he had chosen to ignore it, perhaps realising she didn't really want to discuss it.
"Well, you don't seem very 'Alice' today, that's all. Usually, you're much more talkative – or
you're at least trying to make some attempt to catch up with my own bad habit of rambling. Right
now however, you seem very ... silent. Almost, worried over something."

Alice's fake smiled turned into a genuine one then and she sighed. Of course, he knew her just too
too well. As she looked back into his concerned face, all her worries flew away. How could she have
been so nervous in spending the day with him? He was ... so special to her, and she knew that
they knew each other better then they knew even themselves at times.

"Really? Maybe I just had a lot on my mind, I don't know. I'm – seriously fine though Tarrant.
You needn't worry. Although, I do appreciate it."

Another pause as they looked at each other then and Alice saw the Hatters expression change to a
small smile then. She guessed that her answer managed to sit with him somewhat, even if he
wasn't a hundred percent convinced that she was 'fine'. Standing up straight – when had he moved
so that his face was level with hers? – he turned around slightly, looking up in the direction to
which they were previously walking in.

"Well, we'll be there soon. If it'll help take your mind of whatever it is that is leaving you in such a
dazed state, perhaps I should give you a hint as to where we will be going." He turned to face her
again, smile much stronger than it was only moments before.

"A hint? Why, that's awfully generous of you! Normally, you like leaving me in the dark till the
last minute about your plans."

"And quite right too! You know how I always believe that the best type of things often come as
surprises. Now, here is your hint:" He held up a finger then, as if making a point with whatever it
was he was about to say. He moved forward again, so that his face was once again level with
hers, and continued to speak.

"I've been investigating things that begin with the letter M."

He tapped her on the nose after he finished his sentence, and then once again stood up straight.
Alice on the other hand stood where she was, and blinked. As quickly as what he had said sunk
into her mind however, Alice found herself crossing her arms. Oh it would be a riddle with him
wouldn't it?

"Well, that really wasn't overly helpful you know? If anything, I'm now even more confused than
before you decided to throw a riddle at me."

The Hatter however, merely smiled and continued to walk on, carrying on his babbling of nothing
in particular as Alice once again chased closely behind him. Well, quite obviously he was taking
her somewhere that began with the letter 'M', but that could mean anything. It could be a town, or
a village she had not yet heard of. The M could merely be a description of where he was taking
her. In fact, with the Hatter, M could have nothing to do with where they were going at all, and he
could have in fact just posed the suggestion, just to annoy her – or to just focus her mind on
something else. But Alice wasn't giving in. So, she decided to think of any places in her mind that
could possibly start with the letter M. The result however, did not look to be very pretty.

After a relatively short period of time, Alice found herself stuck at a dead end. What places were
there that began with the letter M? She decided that she honestly, obviously, did not know nearly
enough about Underland as she even thought she did, and it proved to her that she needed to be
shown to a great many more places before she had any hope of understanding anything.

"Oh, I don't know!" She said loudly suddenly.
The Hatter however, didn't look up – instead Alice heard his laughter at her predicament. Oh of course the whole thing would be hilarious to him, everything always was.

"Something wrong, Alice?"

She glared at the man's back, knowing all too well that he was probably grinning from ear to ear at that moment.

"I don't know the answer to your riddle Tarrant, I honestly just don't know it! What do you even mean by the letter M? Are you describing where we're going? Or is that really the title for it? I've tried to think of a possible idea, but each possibility I find draws a blank."

"Dear Alice, it seems like you are developing my problem at rambling, judging from your predicament."

She stopped in her tracks then, and crossed her arms once again, pouting like a young child. This always happened when he threw a riddle at her. He'd continue having fun, whilst she'd be stuck for goodness knows how long pondering over the silly thing!

Looking at her from the corner of her eye and noticing that she'd stopped walking, the Hatter turned around and walked towards her once again. Alice looked up and saw a soft smile was placed on his face – not a mimicking one that she had half expected from him, but a kind one. She uncrossed her arms then and; whilst she was wondering what he was thinking within his very muddled mind, she felt his free hand grab a hold of hers, neither of them looking away from each other as he did so.

"Perhaps you need more hints, my dear." He said in almost a whisper, and almost instantly afterwards turned around to carry on walking, pulling Alice along with him.

Alice looked down at where their hands met one another, noticing that ever since he'd taken hold of hers a soft, fluttering feeling had burst in her stomach. The feeling wasn't unpleasant – in fact it was the opposite, yet it was still rather unusual. She noticed that it was very much a new sensation that she had not felt before, - or at least one she wasn't aware of feeling before then - but knew it was not something to be afraid of. So lost in her own thoughts, Alice almost didn't catch that the Hatter had started talking – or better yet rambling - again.

"Let's see, something beginning with the letter M – what could describe this place that I am taking you to? Well, I guess magnificent would be a good start, and would fit the description rather well. And of course, when we use the word magnificent; marvellous must follow shortly after. So this place is both magnificent and marvellous. Hmm what else? Oh yes! Now I think about it, it is rather magical as well. So, we are going somewhere that is magnificent, marvellous and all together magical. Now let me try and find another M word to describe it. Hmm, what could begin with the letter M to describe such a place...?"

Alice looked up, and almost gasped at the beauty of the scene that was in front of her.

"A meadow?!"

She noticed the Hatter turn to her, smile still on his face – and he stopped in his tracks, Alice stopping herself when she was standing right beside him. Their hands still clasped, Alice was in awe at what was around her. Her friend however, just nodded.

"That's right. A most magnificent, marvellous and magical meadow."

Alice was speechless, for lack of a better word. The sight before her was breathtaking. She knew
that Underland was a place of beauty, so much more beauty than what she would ever find back home – but she never thought that such a place as the one she was in now existed even in Underland. It was like looking upon a dream, the meadow was just so beautiful, so serene. It was as if such a place couldn't even exist; only in imagination. It was impossible for such a place to be there, yet there it was. As that thought came to her mind, Alice remembered the Hatter's words only a few months ago when they were facing yet another impossible thing before them. *It's only impossible if you believe it is.*

"Why Alice, you look absolutely flabbergasted."

Alice turned to look at the Hatter's face then, feeling herself smile as she did so.

"Oh! Sorry. It's just ... it's so ... beautiful."

His smile grew then, as if happy with her answer.

"Good. You know, this is one of my most favourite places in the whole of Underland that I've found to date. Yet, I've had no one to share such a sight with. Ever since you decided to stay I thought, well, sort of knew I suppose, that I would most definitely end up bringing you here one day."

Alice looked back at the meadow, her smile reflecting how happy she felt in that moment. It was truly beautiful and – well, it was as if it was their little secret now, she supposed. Alice couldn't express how happy she was that he'd taken her to the place. Secretly, she was now glad he did – instead of taking her to another tea party. As much as she loved the tea parties, and the company of all their friends with them, she knew that if they had gone to such an event, she may not have known about the meadow's existence at all.

The Hatter held up the basket he was carrying in his other hand then, letting go of her own as he did so. Alice turned to look at him as he did, breaking out of her daze as she did so.

"Dear Alice. How would it be, if you had tea with me?" He asked her, and Alice then noticed that it was the same basket he used when packing cakes and other sweet foods for their tea parties. She laughed slightly at his actions; all the confusion and nervousness she had felt earlier gone far away.

"That - would be lovely. After all, I am rather hungry from the long walk here."

It wasn't a lie either. As soon as he had introduced the idea, Alice suddenly realised how hungry she really was. Not wanting another scene of her stomach speaking for itself as it had done before, they both sat down and prepared the meal.

Alice was happy to see that for once, they weren't just going to feed out on cakes as was usual for a lunch. She almost let out a sigh of relief when she saw sandwiches. She however, wasn't shocked to find a teapot buried in the basket, and suddenly she wondered how he possibly would hope to try and make tea in the middle of nowhere. Still, Alice decided to be smart and not question it, instead just letting it slide. After all, this was the Hatter – he most likely had a plan for everything that involved tea.

The two of them sat and talked about nothing for what felt like the longest time, and Alice found herself laughing quite a lot at her friend's odd questions, whilst he did the same at what were – Alice would probably count in the Hatter's mind – as equally odd questions that she asked him. Oh, how she had missed such discussions with him. When she thought about it, the last time the two of them had got together to talk about nothing in particular was back when he had first asked her about fairy tales. All conversation between them since then had often been about her dress,
and various decisions regarding it. Which Alice of course, didn't mind – but it meant that the two of them were missing out on conversations like the ones they were currently having.

After all conversation was made, the two of them laid out on the grass, looking up at the sky above them. Alice noticed that she hardly ever looked at the sky in Underland, and therefore failed to notice the odd shapes that the clouds were. She was about to laugh at the sight of them, when she heard the Hatter's voice speak up again.

"Your dress is almost finished, you know?"

She turned her head to face him, noticing that he too was looking towards the sky. She sat up then, excited at what he had just said.

"Really?!"

The Hatter turned to look at her then, signature smile still on his face.

"Really. But notice how I said 'almost'. There are a few finishing touches I'd like to make on it first, but it shouldn't take long. I'll let you know when it's ready. But – in case you were worried, or intending to wear it to the Queens ball, you should know that it will most definitely be ready in time for the event."

Alice smiled, happy to know that she would definitely have a dress to wear at her friend's ball. But then she felt a wave of nervousness wave through her stomach again. She still needed an escort. And the only person who she could or would ever consider ... was right in front of her.

"About the ball ... now you bring that topic up."

She looked away from him then, finding that her hands were unusually most interesting at that moment in time. Obviously sensing her nervousness, the Hatter sat up slightly, turning to look at her.

"Yes? What is it? Is it about the dress? Because I honestly won't be hurt if you already have one ready. I only assumed that you'd want to wear it to the event –"

"Tarrant."

"...I'm fine. Thank you." He squeaked quietly. The two of them looked at each other then; And Alice noticed that he was waiting for her to speak.

"It's not about the dress. I want to wear it at the ball, and I'm more than happy that it'll be finished in time. It's – something else, actually. You see, Mirana told me yesterday that, I had to bring an escort to the ball and well ..." She paused, and noticed that he was still staring, waiting for her to continue with what she was saying. And once again as she played over what she wanted to say in her mind, she felt her cheeks burn again. Oh what a time for her to start blushing, what an honestly perfect time.

"I-was-wondering-if-you-wanted-to-be-my-escort."

Silence. Neither of them said anything for a moment. Alice, fearing that she'd be rejected, turned to look up at the Hatter, but noticed that he was just – confused. She watched him blink, as if trying to comprehend what she had said. Wait, what had she just said?

"Alice, dear – I'm terribly sorry but – I honestly did not catch anything you said just then. It was as if you'd just made up your own language, and where that may be good for you, I'm afraid it is not so good for me, as I would love to be able to understand what you're saying when you speak."
She sighed. Oh but of course, she would jumble all her words together into one huge, inconceivable, unreadable mess wouldn't she? It was just so perfect of the situation, as if someone just wanted to make even more of a mockery of her in that moment in time.

She sighed deeply once again, this time in slight annoyance at herself, her hair flying slightly as she did. This time, Alice was sure she'd get the sentence out, complete – and not as a jumbled up mess.

"No Tarrant, I was speaking in my normal tongue then. Or at least, I was trying to. Sorry if it came out as some made up language. What I was trying to say however, or more – trying to ask – was whether or not you'd be my escort to the Queens ball?"

She watched him blink once then, and Alice almost wished she could take back the proposal. She was almost convinced that he would say no then, for whatever reason he would have.

"Why Alice, is that all you wanted to ask?"

Then it was her turn to blink. She furrowed her brow in confusion, and noticed that her friends expression was nothing but calm and – soft.

"Err, yes?" She replied, her bewilderment evident in her voice.

Alice watched for a moment more, and then watched as the Hatter laughed. She blinked once more, unsure as to what was so funny. She tried to play the whole scene that had just happened over in her mind, and found that, even to herself, it was quite humorous. As if it was contagious, Alice found herself laughing too then. Suddenly, as the two of them laughed, the whole situation seemed to be so much less ... serious then it had before. And once again, Alice began to wonder what she was so nervous for in the first place.

Once their laughter had subsided enough for them to talk, Hatter continued to speak, and Alice was suddenly ready for whatever answer he'd give.

"Oh Alice, dear sweet Alice. You are an odd one, you know that? For one, you get all tongue-tied worse than me when asking one simple thing." He shook his head then, still stifling some laughter.

"Well, you still haven't answered me. Will you, or won't you?"

"Well I would have thought that the answer would have been obvious, no?" The Hatter paused, calming himself down from his laughing fit just moments before. He looked at Alice, who continued to stare back at him, dumbfounded. At that, he sighed. "Oh no, it obviously wasn't as obvious as I thought it would have been. I guess I'll have to ask for something in return at the fact that you obviously don't know the answer."

Alice's expression became confused once again, and looked at her friend. Ask for something in return? Was that a yes or a no to her answer and – more importantly, what could the Hatter possibly want in return? Sensing her confusion only grew once again, the Hatter continued talking.

"I shall be your escort to the ball, on the condition that you finally tell me one of those many fairy stories you have buried in that mind of yours. And by that I mean actually tell, like a story should be told and not skip out on all the boring bits."

Alice, felt a huge wave of relief overthrow her then, happiness replacing the confusion and nervousness as she looked at her friend in mild disbelief. He had agreed, yes, and yet all he wanted was a story in return? Well, she did promise she'd tell him one eventually, she supposed
that now would be a better time than, especially considering how happy she was currently feeling at that particular moment in time. She smiled back at him, and nodded.

"Okay, deal. Now let me see, what kind of fairy story should I tell you ..."

She began to think, trying to find a story that the Hatter most probably would like the most. And then it hit her. Why, it was so obvious!

"Let me tell you the story of the boy that never grew up, and remained a child forever."

As expected, Alice watched as the Hatter's eyes lit up then, both eager and excitement being evident there.

"Never grew up and remained a child you say? Why, did he have an argument with time like I did?"

Alice smiled at her friend's enthusiasm, a knowing smile on her face. Of course, that was why he would love the story so much.

"Oh no, nothing like that. You see, the story goes like this. Once upon a time ..."

And so she began to explain the story of Peter Pan to the Hatter, watching as his expression changed from shock to wonder throughout the time she told him it. He was like a young child being told a new story for the very first time. Well, in a way Alice supposed he was just like that. Quite often she found herself stifling laughter at his expressions and outbursts. Honestly, Alice couldn't think of any place where she was happier than when she was sitting next to him, or when they were on one of their many journey's – or 'adventures' as they were so often called.

And as she told her story to the Hatter, that's when she finally discovered it. What the Queen had meant when she questioned her constantly about what he meant to her. Why she had such a knowing expression written on her face yesterday that made Alice want to hit her head a thousand times for not understanding until now. But now she did. She understood. Well, in truth she probably always knew it, self-consciously within herself. She just never took any notice of it.

Alice was falling in love with the Hatter.

And as much as it seemed to shock her at first, she was actually more than fine with that feeling.
A Hatter, Never Reveals His Secrets

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in uploading this chapter. Busy schedules meant that uploading schedule slipped my mind for a little while, but hopefully this chapter will remedy that forgetfulness.

It was the morning of the day of the Queen's ball, and Alice found herself walking towards the dress room. A few days had passed since she had last met with the Hatter, the last time being that of their adventure to the meadow, which Alice still wondered about every now and again. So much had happened that day that she was almost convinced that the whole thing had been nothing but a dream conjured up by her own fascinating imagination.

It was only that morning that she actually realised that that day was in fact not a dream, and that it indeed did happen. She had woken up as normal, got dressed as normal, yet when she left her room to go down for breakfast, someone had arrived before her with a note they said they were to deliver to her. Alice had taken it from them and thanked the deliverer, confusion setting in at first as to what the contents would say – but as she read it, everything made sense and she was filled with an emotion of happiness that overtook her. True to his word, the Hatter had finished making her dress, just in time for the ball as well, and had asked her to visit him sometime after breakfast so that she could pick it up.

And that's what she had done. Now, she was standing right outside the dress room door, pausing before she went to knock. A slight feeling of curiosity washed over her, and Alice wondered what lay before her, and she thought of what felt like a thousand possibilities as to what her dress could look like pass through her mind. She was still very much oblivious of what to expect, but one thing she was most certain of was that whatever the man had created for her, it was sure to be beautiful.

Sighing as if preparing herself for whatever it was that lay before her ahead of the door, Alice raised her hand, and lightly tapped on the door with her fist. She waited a few seconds, and then went to open the door herself. The Hatter was expecting her, and she was currently living in the castle anyway – it would be silly of her to wait outside. After all, all the other times she'd visited she'd followed the same procedure, a small knock that was an indication she was there and then she'd help herself to walk in, expecting nothing but her friends warm smile to greet her.

This time, was slightly different however. Alice walked in and closed the door behind her, and saw the Hatter working on something over at his desk. Curious, she began to walk over to him. However, before she got an opportunity to see whatever it was he was working on, she noticed that he had laid a small fabric sheet on top of it - and rather hastily might she add. Alice considered how odd this was in her mind and continued to cast her eyes at the position on the desk where the mysterious item lay, not noticing that the Hatter had turned around so he was facing her.

"Alice! I didn't expect you so soon. Well, I expected you yes – but I was certain that you wouldn't be here for a short while longer."

Alice blinked slightly as her friend spoke, and turned to look up at his smiling face, feeling a small smile break out onto her own.
"Well, when I got your note this morning I was most overjoyed and excited to know my dress was complete, so much so that I just couldn't wait any longer. I decided to finish my breakfast quickly so I could arrive her sooner," Her eyes darted to the object on the table once again, that wave of curiosity from earlier washing over her. Her brow furrowed slightly as it did so. "What is that you were working on before I interrupted?"

"Mmm? Oh," The Hatter replied, following the direction of her gaze. He quickly stood in front of the item on the desk, as if doing so would hide its existence completely from her. "It's nothing really, just a small something I thought I'd work on till you arrived. Anyway! You didn't visit to see what else I was currently working on, or for idle chit chat on such a subject. You'd like to see your dress now I assume?"

Alice's eyes darted back up to the man then, confusion evident in them. Just what was it he was hiding from her? It was obvious to her that whatever the item was he didn't want her to see it, but whatever reason for? She shook her head, trying to ignore the curiosity that was trying to take over her, and replaced her confused expression with a smile yet again.

"Oh yes please! I can't wait to see what you've done with it!"

"Then I will go bring it in for you. Just stay here and – try not to touch anything. And by that I mean anything. I'm still very much in the process of moving things around."

She watched him hesitate, and then run off in the direction as to wherever her dress currently was hidden. For a moment Alice found herself left in the room all alone, and she just stood there, looking around at the great marvel that it was. Still highly messy as it had been the various other times she had visited yes, but in all honesty – Alice was sure that it wouldn't fit being tidy. As was the Hatters way, the messy atmosphere made it seem more inviting, and made it known that the room was somewhere that someone worked in. And that was how it should be for someone who was the owner of such character.

Alice carried on looking around, standing idly still from her position in the middle of the room. And then, her attention was drawn to it again. The mysteriously – not so very well hidden – item on the desk. The item that was, quite literally, only hidden from Alice due to a small piece of fabric. She frowned, remembering how she was instructed not to touch anything. Emphasis put heavily on the final word in that sentence.

Even so, she couldn't help but find herself walking towards it soon after her gaze had met it. She wasn't going to touch it, no no, that would be bad, not to mention the Hatter would probably shoo her out the room for good then. But – it was just, there. Right in front of her. Just sitting, almost begging to be revealed. And in that moment, Alice felt like she had no control over where her feet were taking her, or what her mind was really telling her to do.

If it was only a small something, then why could she not see what it was?

Alice suddenly heard footsteps and – almost jumping as she returned to reality – tried to look nonchalant. She turned her gaze to a particular group of fabric on the other side of the room, and stared at it, admiring yet again the number of shades and colours that were in that pile.

She sensed the Hatter stop in his place when he walked into the room once again, and Alice had to fight the urge to whistle innocently as she avoided gazing towards the desk, knowing all too well that would reveal her game. Instead, she turned slowly to look at him, and noticed the Hatters own gaze moved from her to the hidden item and back again. She almost wanted to laugh at his attempt at 'discreet' then, but chose not to, instead just smiling as she watched him. When his gaze reached hers again however, he smiled back – and Alice was sure she detected a hint of nervousness in his expression.
"Are you not going to show me my dress, Tarrant?" She asked innocently.

For a second Alice noticed him hesitate, smile falling slightly but then returning quickly after.

"Err, yes. Yes, of course."

He walked towards her, hands both behind his back as he held her dress behind him. Once again Alice fought the urge to laugh at him, not understanding what on earth was making him so ridiculously nervous at that moment in time. When he stopped in front of her however, Alice watched as he looked around the room slightly, and then as his gaze returned to her.

"Well, I have your dress here, with me, behind my back in actual fact. However – and I almost feel stupid for asking this – but, would you mind terribly, perhaps, if you don't open it or, look at it, until later tonight when you go to wear it? That is, if you still intend to wear this very dress to the ball."

Alice stared back at him then, still failing to understand why he was so nervous. Her gaze went to the item behind his back, and she noticed then that there was no hope of catching a sneak preview of her dress, as it was very much wrapped up in another fabric. She looked back at the Hatters face and noticed that his nervousness was still there, waiting for her to answer. So, she sighed, and smiled at him.

"I'll honestly tell you, I don't understand why you don't want me to see it right here, right now – but if it's what you want, then I won't open it till later tonight."

She watched as he let out what seemed to be a relieved sigh, and went to hand over the packaged dress to her.

"It's not really any big reason as to why, completely honest. Either way it would make no difference if you saw it now, or later, or five minutes from now. It's just – well ... just take it."

Alice saw him stumble over his words slightly at the end of his sentence, and her smile grew slightly. She realised then why he didn't want her to see it now, or so she thought she did. He was nervous, nervous as to her reaction would be. Weather she'd like the gift or not. And as silly as it seemed in her mind – Alice knew without a doubt she would like whatever it was the Hatter had made for her – she could somewhat sympathise. If their positions and been switched, and it was her handing him a gift she made for him out of the goodness of her own heart, Alice knew that she would very much be nervous herself.

She took the package of him them, smiling as she did so in hopes of somehow reassuring him that there was no way possible that she could hate or dislike the dress.

"Thank you," She replied warmly afterwards, looking up at him once the dress was in her arms. Alice noticed his own, normal smile returned in that moment.

"Yes well, now that that's done and over, it's time for me to get back to work I think."

The Hatter took his hat off and placed it next to the mysterious item on the table, and Alice couldn't help but sense that he really wanted to finish off whatever it was he was currently working on. Curiosity taking over her again, she walked behind him, and tried to look over his shoulder to try and get a glimpse at the mysterious thing.

"What is it you're working on?"

The Hatter almost jumped when she spoke then, obviously thinking that she was no longer in the
room. Alice noticed that the item was still hidden from her, and that he had not started working on it yet.

"As I said, it is only a small something. It honestly holds no real significance for you to worry about."

"If that's true then, why won't you let me see it?"

Alice knew that her curious and stubborn side was starting to take over, but she honestly really wanted to know what it was and who it was for; especially since he was throwing it off as nothing terribly important. He turned slightly so that he could face her, his expression returning to that of shock over something that should be probably be so obvious. Once again however, for Alice, it wasn't as obvious as it was to him.

"It's not finished yet. I don't like showing others unfinished work, it just seems unprofessional to me. I mean, what if I totally changed what it looked like so it was no longer recognisable to what it originally looked like? What if I decided to scrap the project completely and start from scratch, or to just forget about it and work on something else? What if-"

"Tarrant."

"... I'm fine. Thank you." He squeaked quietly. He turned fully around them, moving slightly to hide the mysterious item from her view. "The point is, Alice dear, that I can't show you. Not yet anyway. Perhaps I'll show you once it's finished, perhaps I won't. That will be decided when it's time for it to be decided. Now however, is not that time, so you I won't tell you what it is."

Alice blinked. Had, any of what he had just said really made sense? Probably not but – she was sure that the whole explanation was a pretty certain no on finding out what it was.

They stood in silence for a while, just looking at each other as if waiting for the other to falter and give in. After a short moment however, Alice sighed in defeat. As stubborn as she could be, sometimes the Hatter could be three times as stubborn. Only sometimes though.

"Fine, I won't press the matter anymore. I was only trying to take an interest was all."

"And I do appreciate it, but you're still not finding out what it is. A hatter after all, never reveals his secrets."

"Secret? So whatever you're hiding is a secret?!"

Suddenly getting the feeling that she shouldn't have said anything, the Hatter turned her around and began to push her to the door of which she had entered. Oh dear, had she upset him that much? She didn't mean to press the matter so much that she'd upset or irritate him, all she wanted to know was what the item was. Was her curious attitude really that bad a habit sometimes?

As he pushed her to the door however, The Hatter began to babble again. As soon as he did this, Alice knew he wasn't really angry with her - which she should have noticed that by noticing that neither his eye colour nor accent had made any sudden changes.

"Now Alice, as much as I hate to kick you out – I really must get back to work right now. Your company is always a lovely pleasure to be in the presence of, but at the moment I'm a little busy I'm afraid. Don't worry your little head over what it is I'm working on, in fact it would be best if you forget about it completely – for now at least. And of course, you must be very busy today as it is, so it will do you no good to dilly dally here all day long."

By now, they had reached the door. The Hatter opened it, and pushed her outside slightly, but he
didn't close the door on her immediately. Alice turned around, looking up at him with a confused expression on her face as she tried to spit out a sentence that would make relatively any sense to the mixture of emotions she was currently feeling at that moment in time.

"Wh- what? Yes I – I suppose I am busy but –"

"But nothing, dear Alice. You should continue with what else you have left to do for tonights preparations. You are, after all a very important guest at this rather important event."

Alice hesitated for a second, her gaze switching to the ground below her as she did so. She then looked up at the Hatter again, her expression still very much as confused as it had been a second ago.

"Y – Yes. Okay ... if that's what you want. I – I guess I'll see you later then?"

The Hatter merely smiled his normal smile then, as if everything that was happening in that moment in time was normal procedure for the two of them.

"Yes. Later. I'll see you later in the Queen's sitting room, just before the ball."

Before she even had time to reply, the door was shut before her. Not forcefully, or in any show of anger, but just – shut. She stood holding her dress, highly confused over everything that had just happened. She – had just been escorted out of the dress room, by the Hatter, with nothing but a promise to meet later as was planned given to her. There was no anger, no annoyance that she could detect – so what on earth could have spurred such events to happen?

Understanding that she was still staring at a blank door at that moment in time, Alice turned on her heel and began to walk off to her room. She needed to keep her dress there until later that evening. In her mind however, she still couldn't help but want to know whatever it was that the Hatter was working on – and why it was described as being yet another one of his secrets to her. Knowing all too well that no matter how long she dwelled on the idea no answer would come to her mind, Alice sighed, and decided that she'd find just have to wait to find out what it was sometime in the future - whenever it was finally completed to the man's satisfaction.

Sometimes, she really couldn't understand what was running through his mind.
Joyous Celebrations

Alice had returned to her room, a short time remaining for her to get ready until she was expected to meet both the Queen and the Hatter for the ball. She looked down at the dress on her bed, still very much wrapped in the fabric used to conceal its identity. Good to her word, Alice hadn't opened nor taken a peak of it during the whole day, mostly because she had been busy helping her friend to prepare for the ball later that night. But now she would. Now, Alice would finally get a chance to see the dress that had left her so curious for what felt like so long.

She sat on the edge of her bed and began to remove the fabric that protected it delicately, as she didn't want to accidentally rip the dress itself. It didn't take long to uncover the dress, as the other fabric hadn't been tied overly tightly – but when Alice saw the dress itself she found herself gasping in surprise. She had expected it to be beautiful, but what she came face to face with was beyond words of description.

Staring back at her was one of the most wonderful dresses Alice had ever seen in her life, and that wasn't a lie. It was made out of the richest royal blue colour; the fabric soft to the touch. But that wasn't what caught Alice's attention. No, it was instead the intricate detail that had been put into it. The dress had a small pattern designed on it, and as Alice traced it with her fingers, she couldn't help but wonder how the Hatter had done it – let alone have the patience with it. And in such a small amount of time also, only someone who was a master at the arts could have created such a thing. Of course, Alice had never questioned her friend's magnificent talent, yet she had never really seen enough of his work to know just how creative he could actually be. She was actually partly glad that he had left the dress as such a surprise for her to ponder about for so long, as he had been right all along: the best types of surprises were most definitely the ones that were most unknown to a person.

"It really is a dress fit for a fairy tale princess..." Alice whispered to herself, her hand still tracing the detail on it, face still smiling in awe at its beauty. For a moment, Alice's mind raced back to all the fairy stories she had been told, all the make believe princesses dressed in extravagantly beautiful gowns and dresses that were so much more beautiful and creative than the ones she had known people to wear back in her own world. And as she continued to stare down at the dress the Hatter had made for her, Alice couldn't help but feel as if all those fairy stories had been woven into one, and the dress before her had its own story to tell. Her story. The story of a young girls adventures in the make believe world of Wonderland.

Just then, she heard a knock at the door, and Alice tore her gaze away from the dress long enough to see one of the Queens maids open the door slightly. A smile fell upon her lips as she saw the girl smile warmly at her, closing the door behind her.

"The Queen said that you'll probably be getting ready for the ball now." The maids gaze fell from Alice to the dress on her bed, and Alice noticed her smile widen as she did so. "My, that is a most beautiful dress you have there!"

Still smiling herself, Alice turned to look at the dress, returning to trace the pattern upon it.

"It is, isn't it?" She replied absentmindedly.

The maid noticed her preoccupied gaze, and only continued to walk closer; putting whatever it was she was carrying on a stool to the side as she did so.

"Would you like me to help you put it on? A dress such as that must be worn to be admired even more miss."
Alice turned to look at the maid, and nodded.

"Yes, yes that would be lovely. Thank you."

She got up and carried the dress with her to the screen on the other side of the room. All the time as Alice was preparing, she couldn't help but think that the ball that night would be a magnificent event, a time in which miracles would happen, just like how a real fairy tale often worked out in the end.

Alice found herself walking down to hall, very much feeling like a princess as she did so. The maid had also styled her hair – much to Alice's distaste. She preferred to keep it down, as she was used to over the years, but the maid had only insisted that as she was to be a guest of honour, she should have a new style for the occasion. She complied, knowing that all too well if she argued with her it would get her nowhere, and that the maids mind was already set – probably due to Mirana's influence as well.

As she reached the door to the sitting room however, she couldn't help but feel slightly shy. Usually, in the past when her mother had organised such events back home, Alice had felt nothing but boredom at them, and often wondered what their point was in the first place. In Underland however, she felt quite differently on the matter. She knew their celebrations meant a lot to them – as she remembered from the Frabjous Day celebration. Alice often found herself enjoying the events, but then again, she had never been asked to be a guest of honour before. Was there a certain way in which she would be expected to behave? What did one do at such an event when given such a title? She wasn't sure, but she knew one thing: she was going to find very soon.

She sighed, not noticing that she had in fact stopped in front of the door, lost in her thoughts. She looked up at the massive doors, and – realising that she couldn't stand outside forever – knocked, and let herself enter the sitting room.

As she walked in she noticed both the Queen and the Hatter almost instantly, both of them were involved in some sort of deep conversation. Well, that was until she had walked in. Both set of eyes fell on her then as she walked towards them, expressions filled with – what Alice could only guess was one of pleasant shock. She noticed out of the corner of her eye that the Hatter had started fidgeting from where he was standing, and when their eyes met he quickly looked down at the ground beneath him, as if it suddenly become most interesting to him. Alice felt herself blush then, and she wasn't sure if it was to do with his actions – or the fact that both of them had been staring at her in silence. Mirana however, didn't seem to notice anything, and only walked towards her with arms open wide, a large smile on her face as she did so.

"Alice! Why you look absolutely stunning!" She exclaimed when they were only a short distance apart.

Mirana placed her hands on Alice's shoulders in a reassuring manner, smiling warmly at her as she did so.

"Thank you Mirana, you're awfully kind."

Alice noticed that the Hatter hadn't moved from his position behind Mirana, still fidgeting and trying to avoid eye contact. She smiled, finding his nervous behaviour to be rather adorable. Mirana didn't fail to notice the girls smile grow, and as she learnt what the smile on her face was for, she leant in discreetly and whispered something to Alice.

"And would I be right to assume, that our dear Hatter made this marvellously wonderful dress for you?"
Alice nodded in response, remembering all too well the conversation she had with the Queen the other day where she had brought up that he was indeed making her dress. Mirana’s smile only grew even more then – surely she had taken lessons from Chessur in that art – and pulled back as she did so.

"I knew it. Nothing passes my knowledge that easily."

She let go of her hold on Alice then, and turned to look back at both of her and the Hatter. Alice didn’t miss her expression then, and she was sure she had some idea of what it was the Queen was planning in her mind.

"Well, now everyone’s here. If you two will excuse me for just a moment, I promised I would speak to someone quickly before we moved downstairs to the ball. I won’t be long. I’ll just leave you two here for a few moments."

Before either of them could say anything, Mirana had already turned and left the room, leaving both Alice and the Hatter very much alone. Alice watched as her friend left, and sighed in contentment.

"You do look very beautiful, Alice."

Alice turned then, and saw that the Hatter was no longer looking down at the floor but instead was looking right back at her, smiling warmly. She walked towards him, and as was expected he then started to ramble once again.

"Not that – you don't usually look so, that would be wrong to say. Because you often do look very pretty in your normal Alice way. But –"

"Tarrant."

"... I'm fine. Thank you."

He was looking at the ground again then, and Alice knew he was probably trying to search for what to say next, or how to word whatever it was that was floating in his mind that he wanted to say. After a moment, he looked up at her, and she smiled at him. The Hatter smiled back at her, and in that moment Alice knew that the nervousness between them had all but evaporated into the air.

"I'm very sorry about earlier on. I didn't want to kick you out of the dressroom, but I just – kind of, needed you to not be there at that moment."

Alice looked at him in a confused manner, wondering what on earth he could possibly mean by that. As if reading her expression, the Hatter continued to talk.

"You see, I was working on something – a special something. But, it wasn't finished, and I didn't want you to see it until it was complete." He paused, smiling at her expression. "That dress does look beautiful on you Alice dear, but I'm afraid your outfit – is not quite complete."

Before Alice could even question him, she realised he was pulling something out from behind his back. She hadn't noticed that he was standing with both hands behind him until that moment – but then she came face to face with something that shocked her in the nicest way possible.

In the Hatters hands before her, was a hat. A small hat. A simple hat. But a very beautiful hat all the same. It was made out of the same colour as her dress, and on its side had a simple blue flower. She reached out to touch it, and realised the fabric was as soft to touch as her dress was.
She smiled in awe at it, and Alice found herself completely and utterly speechless.

"It occurred to me, when I was making your dress, that I have never seen you with a hat. And that you had often mentioned how much you liked them. And so, I came to the decision to make you this. Which proved harder to hide then I thought it would be, considered your more curious then Chessur a lot of the time. You really must learn to control your curiosity Alice dear; it will only get you into trouble."

As the Hatter continued to ramble, Alice took the hat away from him, continuing to stare at it in awe. As if the dress hadn't been enough of a pleasant surprise, now he had made her a hat too? Alice swore she could feel the happiness bubble inside of her.

"Do you like it?" He asked her simply, an edge of anticipation in his voice.

Alice tore her gaze from the hat in her hands, and smiled at him. Then, to the Hatters shock, she flew her arms around him – whilst still holding the hat safely of course – and hugged him.

"I do. I love both gifts, the hat and the dress. Thank you."

The Hatter stood their stunned for a moment, but then Alice felt his arms slowly wrap around her in response to her embrace. A smile spread across her face, and Alice couldn't ignore how happy and perfectly content she felt in his arms. She wouldn't have minded if they could have stayed like that forever.

However, the embrace didn't last long. The Hatter broke apart, his hands on her arms as she did so, and he looked down at her smiling.

"I'm very happy you like them. Now, why don't you wear the hat, instead of just holding it? Here."

Alice watched as her friend took the hat out of her hand, and put it on top of her head. A strange memory came to her mind as he did so, and Alice couldn't help but remember the time when he was working for the Red Queen, and how she had returned his own hat to him. Their roles reversed this time, and the occasions now were happier celebrations. Both of them were smiling brightly as they looked back at one another.

Neither of them had noticed Mirana had returned, that was, until they heard her soft laughter. Both of them tore apart and turned to look at her – their smiles still prominent on their faces. Mirana smiled back at both of them, and Alice began to wonder if there really was anyone she had needed to talk to – or if the whole plan had been an excuse for her and the Hatter to be alone together for a moment. Not that she minded, but Mirana had as of late seemed to be taking an interest in trying to act like a matchmaker for the two of them.

"Oh Alice, what a beautiful hat! My, looks like I'll have to ask Mr. Hightopp to make me one sometime soon."

"And I would be more than happy to work on one for you. You'll have to let me know what type of hat you'd like though. Perhaps we could discuss it one afternoon?"

Alice rolled her eyes, sensing that rather soon he would spew off a list of a thousand different hats that she had never heard of. She heard Mirana's small laughter again, and watched as she nodded to him.

"We shall have to do just that, I do rather love the hat you made for our dear Alice here. Anyway, now is not the time to discuss this business I am afraid. Instead, shall we go join the festivities?"
Both the Hatter and Alice nodded, and suddenly Alice felt a slight nervousness overtake her again. She still had very little idea of how she was meant to act at such an event. She knew that she had both Mirana and the Hatter there to guide her and support her, and with that thought in mind she felt slightly better. But still, the unknown was enough to leave a slight nagging feeling within her.

"My lady, allow me."

She turned and saw the Hatter's playful smile, and noticed that he had offered her his arm to take. She giggled, and took it, looking up at him as she did so.

"Right, shall we leave now?"

She saw him nod, and off they walked – to attend a most joyous event.

The celebration was in full swing when they arrived, everyone who was invited having what could only be described as the time of their lives. Alice saw a table on one side of the room that was accompanied by some rather familiar faces. Of course, the celebration to those two would be nothing but an extra special tea party event, and she watched as Thackery tried throwing a sugar lump in Mally's direction, but failed and instead ended up landing near a selection of cakes. A smile came to Alice's lips as she watched him laugh his manic laughter. Well, Thackery wouldn't be the same without his madness, after all.

As she walked down the stairs with the Hatter on one side of her and the Queen on the other, she noticed that those who were celebrating had stopped slightly, all turned to face them as they descended down the grand staircase. A wave of faces were smiling back at her, faces which she didn't know, but knew that they probably knew her too well. And to the side at the bottom of the staircase, she heard someone announce their arrival.

"And now we welcome, Queen Mirana and her guest of honour, Lady Alice – champion of Underland – to the event."

The wave clapped as they reached the bottom of the staircase, and Alice's grip on the Hatter tightened. She hoped that she wasn't expected to make some sort of speech, – for she had nothing prepared of which to say. As she thought that, Mirana had already moved over to her table, the Hatter guiding both himself and Alice in the same direction. They both sat down as Mirana remained standing, beaming at those that had come to attend the event.

"My friends. I thank you for coming to this joyous celebration. It warms my heart to see so many of you. Now, I ask that you all enjoy yourselves, and let the event commence!"

She watched Mirana raise a glass, and then sit down again, those in the sea of faces doing the same before they returned to what they had been doing previously to their entrance. Alice blinked in confusion, and turned to look at the Hatter who was smiling happily.

"That's it? Just a tiny speech and then – celebration continues?"

The Hatter turned to look at her, smile meeting blank confusion.

"But of course! Why, what did you expect Alice? No one would want to spend an entire evening just listening to a speech. How utterly boring would that be?"

Alice blinked again, complete and utter wonder written on her face.

"O-Oh." She merely replied, and turned to look back at the joyful faces of the people who were
dancing and having a merry time. A smile found its way on her lips. The Hatter was right, what
did she expect? Of course things would be very different here from what they were in her world,
everything was. It should not have surprised her that the party itself would be more enjoyable then
just hearing the Queen talk about a number of things that most probably meant nothing at all. And
it amazed her how she didn't have to say anything, although it made the nervousness within her fly
far away.

Mirana turned to both the Hatter and Alice then, noticing that they were smiling at just watching
the enjoyment of the event. She smiled herself at their faces, and then leant forward to speak to
them.

"Alice, Hatter, you need not sit here all night. Go off and join in with the celebrations, it is most
obvious that you both want to do so."

Alice turned to look at her friend, and noticed her warm expression once again. Well, she did want
to join in on the celebration, just watching it seemed like fun. She then felt a tug on her hand to the
side of her, and as she turned around she noticed it was the Hatter, who was already standing and
pulling her to get up.

"Come Alice. Let us show you how our celebrations work in this land."

Before she could say anything, Alice found that she had already stood from her seat, and that she
was already being dragged halfway across the room. She let out a laugh, knowing that she didn't
have the faintest idea what was going on. Alice then noticed the music that was playing, and
noticed that it was a poem she had heard such a long time ago. She almost knew the words off by
heart, although she never understood how she had known it – until now. Alice turned to look at
the Hatter then, a knowing expression on both their faces, but for different reasons. Alice was
happy to know that she recognised the song that was playing, but why was the Hatter so happy?

"Alice, would you like to share this dance with me?"

She stared at him for a second. Dance. With him? Well, of course she wanted to, but she had little
to no idea of any Underlandian dances. And if he started futterwakening again, well she would be
lost. Still, something in his expression seemed to promise her that he wouldn't be dancing the
futterwaken, and, well there was no one else better to teach her. Alice looked around the room and
saw how the others were dancing, and decided that it looked rather easy to understand. So, she
turned back to face the Hatter, her decision made.

"Hatter, I'd love to." She replied, smiling up at him as she placed her hand in his.

It didn't take Alice long to quickly get to grips with the dance. It was rather simple, and she was
silently thankful for that. In actual fact, it was rather similar to the dances that she had been a part
of back home. Perhaps her mother dragging her to such events wasn't a bad thing after all, not if it
prepared her for the enjoyable dances in Underland.

The night continued on as it had begun; nothing but happiness and joyfulness from around. Alice
couldn't count the amount of times she laughed and danced during the celebration. Every now and
then, someone would walk over to her and talk to her, asking her a number of questions, some
making sense more than others, but there was always that question about her being the champion
of Underland. 'How did you do it?' 'Were you frightened?' They would exclaim, as if wanting her
to tell her story of how she defeated both the Jabberwocky and the Red Queen all in the same day.
At one point, Alice found she was telling a crowd of people her story, and every now and then
she would hear the 'oohs' and the 'ahhs' as they stared back at her in shock. Her audience seemed
to be happy with her account, as they had applauded her afterwards, some even going to thank her
for all she'd done. When they did that, she often felt the need to tell them that there was no need to
thank her, and that she couldn't possibly do it without the help of her friends behind her. If it wasn't for the Hatter helping her find her muchness again. Still, getting the impression that it was important for them to thank her, she kept quiet, instead just nodding and saying a silent thank you to them as they turned to carry on about their business.

After what was probably the fifth time of her telling her story, Alice was getting highly tired of becoming a storyteller. She went to Mirana and asked if she could be excused for a moment, claiming she needed a bit of air. Mirana simply nodded, telling her to return as soon as she felt she was ready too. Alice nodded, and walked off out a nearby door to an ongoing garden. The garden was quiet – everyone else being inside still celebrating merrily. Alice was silently thankful for the moment to herself, and continued to walk on a bit further.

She walked until she came to a small pond that was surrounded by a fence, and decided to lean on it. She stared at the reflection of the stars in the pond, and watched as the small fish that were living within it swam to and fro, to and fro. A small smile fell on her lips, and Alice realised that she had never felt as happy as she did in that single moment. Her mind raced to the adventure that brought her back to Underland again, the same story that she had told time and time again that night. So much had happened since she had arrived, and in the months she had decided to stay so much had changed too. Underland was still very much the wonderland she knew as a child – perhaps even more so now that the Red Queen's reign of terror had ended. Alice couldn't help but be glad that things had turned out the way they did, and that now the inhabitants of Underland were so much happier.

So lost in her own thoughts, Alice didn't even notice the sound of footsteps behind her. It wasn't until she sensed someone standing beside her, or when that very person started to speak in their familiar voice, that she realised she was no longer alone.

"When the Queen told me you had retired to the garden for a moment, I began to wonder if you weren't enjoying the ball at all."

Alice tore her gaze from the pond up to the Hatter beside her, and smiled at him.

"Oh no, quite the opposite in fact. I do believe I've never had so much fun at an event. I just needed some time to myself, really."

"Ah well, that would be understandable. You should have known that being a guest of honour would only cause those that do not know as well as I do to question you about a dozen different things. I wouldn't be surprised if they even asked you what your favourite tea was."

Alice laughed a little then. Well, no one had asked her that question – but it would have made a change from the other odd things she got asked. Still, nothing came close to confounding her as was her friend's riddles. Evidence of that was how the both of them still often pondered just how a raven was like a writing desk.

She turned back to look out at the pond again, mind falling back onto the past. Her mind thought about just how far the two of them had come through everything, and yet they were still as inseparable as they had been the day she arrived. Suddenly, something hit her in her mind, and Alice was met with a wall of confusion. A wall of confusion that only one person could answer. And that very person was standing right beside her.

"Tarrant, I have a question for you, if you wish to answer it."

She turned her head slightly so that she could see the Hatter's face, and noticed that his attention was back on her once again, signature smile on his face.
"Alice dear, I believe I have told you time and time again; whenever you have a question you wish to ask of me I will try and answer it to the best of my abilities. Now what is it you wish to know?"

Alice turned around then, and leant back against the fence. She thought about how she should plan to ask him the question that was playing on her mind, whether or not she would ask him directly, or if she should divert around the topic somewhat. Deciding to take the second option, she looked up at him again, smiling herself as she did so.

"Well, do you remember our discussion on fairy stories, and how confused you were over the content of them?"

"Why yes, I do in fact. But then you came along and helped me make sense of that current predicament. You're very clever like that you know?"

Alice felt herself blush at the compliment in that sentence, and was glad that it was dark so that he couldn't tell. If he knew she was blushing, it would not make the current situation – or what she was trying to ask him – any easier. Instead, she sighed, and looked down at her lap.

"Well, I heard a story – here, in Underland that was very much like the fairy stories we talked about. A lot of it made perfect sense, except one thing. Would you mind terribly, if I explained it to you? Perhaps you'll understand why I am confused, perhaps not. I'm sure you'll be familiar with the story either way."

The Hatter merely turned and looked at her, sitting on the fence next to her as he did. Alice's attention was still on her lap, as if it was the most interesting thing to her at that moment in time.

"I will try. After all, you helped me understand your stories, so I suppose it only makes perfectly good sense that I help you make sense of whatever is confusing you of this story you've found."

Alice smiled, and turned to look at him, relieved that he had agreed. But then again, why wouldn't he? After all, the Hatter had no idea what story she was talking about, even though Alice knew that he knew how it was told so very well.

"Thank you," She said, and sighed. Just how many times would she be telling stories that night? Hopefully, this would be the last time – no, she knew it would be. "Well, where do I begin? Let's see. This story started off with a young girl. She was a silly little thing really; her curiosity often got the better of her, and because of it she got into all sorts of trouble and mischief. The girl had this invisible best friend you see. The greatest best friend a girl could ever ask for, and well – the time she spent with him would often be the best of times. Others told her she was silly; mad perhaps – but her friend? He never questioned her, never tried to make her be someone who she quite rightfully was not."

She paused, taking a quick glance to the Hatters face, who was looking back at her, his expression easily telling her how absorbed he was of her story so far.

"Well, the girl grew up – and yet her imaginary friend still remained. By this time, she was convinced he was nothing more but a figment of her imagination, a dream perhaps. There wasn't any possibly way that he could have existed. Anyway, one day – the girl's mother had set a surprise engagement party for her, and the girl was very angry when she found that out. So angry in fact, she ran away. But unlike a normal runaway, she ran into the garden and came face to face with a rabbit hole. Much to the girl's surprise, she fell right into it and – ended up in another world. 'How strange!' She thought. The rabbit hole led to another world. It couldn't have been true. But it was. Eventually, she met a group of creatures who told her she's all wrong, not quite right, and that she couldn't possibly be the right person they were searching for. Confused by what they
meant, the girl was then led in various directions, often being told that she was expected to do something that she has no idea of understanding. She eventually met a group of – rather mad might I add – friends around a table. One of those very people – the girl was sure she knew before. He was probably one of the maddest of the bunch. In fact, he was so crazy, he shrunk her to a tiny size and stuffed her into a teapot on one occasion!

Once again, she looked up at the Hatters face again, and saw a knowing smile on his face. Of course, he knew this story only too well.

"Anyway, as she continued on her small adventure, this crazy man joined her, arguing with everyone else and telling them she was indeed the right person they wanted, and that he'd know her anywhere. The girl continued to be reminded time and time again of who she is and who she should be, what she has to do, but she doesn't believe anything that anyone told her, convinced that it was nothing but a very odd dream. However, after the mad man gets caught by the most vile and most horrible woman imaginable, the girl tries to save him instead – but gets caught herself in the process. They both eventually escape though, and they made it to the castle of the rightful ruler of the land around them. Once there, the girl was once again reminded of what she should do, and – although not to happy with the decision – decided to agree. It was there that she learnt that the man who followed her was in fact the imaginary friend she knew from when she was little. And not only that, she found out he's not actually imaginary, he's very much real. Well, the girl was more than happy to learn that – but then as one realisation dawned on her so did another - and she was soon reminded again that she has to fight a most terrifying creature known as a Jabberwocky.

The next day she enters the battle, scared out of her mind now knowing that everything around her is real, and fights the terrifying creature. She eventually she does kill the damn thing, thankfully. Happiness was restored across the land, and the crown returned back to its rightful Queen. That very Queen gave the girl a vial of the monsters blood, telling her it would give her whatever her heart desired. The girl wondered for a small moment if it would help her return home, but just as she was about to find out by drinking it, the mad man returned – telling her to stay in the magical world around her. After a pause for thought, she obliged – and decided to stick around for a while."

Alice frowned then, and looked away at the Hatter, finding that her lap was once again, more interesting at that moment in time.

"And that's the part that leaves me confused."

She turned to gaze at the Hatter quickly, and saw that his expression was somewhat worried. She thought over what she had said, and figured that he was probably worried over the part to which she was confused, knowing all too well that in his mind, Alice could have been confused over a hundred different things. As if trying to hide it, he smiled quickly, and looked back at her.

"But dear Alice, why are you so confused? Surely the story ended well, did it not?"

She frowned again and turned back to look down at her dress.

"Well yes, it did end well – but it didn't end properly, from my point of view. Not for a fairy story at least."

"Alice, I'm still not sure why you're confused? What is it that you're wondering about? How should the story have ended?"

Alice hesitated for a moment, once again trying to find the correct way to form the very thought that was swimming around her mind. She needed to know, that much she was certain of – but at
the same time, she didn't want to scare him away. After all, Alice was sure of her feelings, especially now they were staring her so blindly in the face all the time, but – his feelings? That was a different matter completely.

Not moving her gaze, she fidgeted slightly. She'd got this far with her question; she might as finish asking him. She breathed in deeply, as if that would give her all the confidence she would need to continue with what she wanted to say.

"What would it take for that crazy, mad, yet completely wonderful man to kiss the girl already?"

There was silence for a moment, and Alice almost wished she could take the question right back, that she could reverse her actions up to the point before she asked it in the first place. She was sure she had scared him, and – well if his answer wasn't what she wanted to hear then ... what had she done to their relationship as it stood now? Was it possible she just made things unbearably awkward between them?

Just as she was thinking about getting up to run away, she felt a gentle hand take a hold of her chin, pulling her face to look up at the Hatter. As she did, she was almost shocked at what her eyes met with. There in his expression where she expected nothing but fear and anxiety she saw nothing but love – and a small layer of nervousness along with it. She watched him smile, and it was at that moment Alice knew she hadn't made the wrong decision at all. In fact, she'd made the completely right one - and for that she was glad. Their faces leant in to each other, the gap between them becoming smaller and smaller as they did, until finally – he spoke.

"Well, an invitation like that certainly helps."
"Mustard!? Come let's not be silly Thackery, how can anyone enjoy a perfect piece of toast if you ruin it by drowning it in mustard?"

Alice looked back and forth between the Hatter and Thackery, the pair of them involved in an ongoing argument over what was better to be used to spread on toast. She wasn't sure how the argument had initially started -- well, that was a lie; she knew exactly how it had begun. The Hatter had spun off a list of various jams, which then eventually led to Thackery chipping in his own ideas. What she wasn't sure of however, was how the two of them had got to a debate on mustard. The piece of toast that was the beginning of the whole argument - and was in actual fact very much intended for Alice in the first place - was still in Hatter's hand, except now he was waving it about as he continued attempting to prove his point. Alice in actual fact wasn't even that hungry to begin with -- but now she was beginning to doubt she would ever receive the piece of toast before it ended up becoming too cold to eat.

"As much as the rest of us love hearing you two argue over such trivial matters, I propose that you instead change the subject quickly. Poor Alice must be starving right now." Came Chessur's voice as he stared into the cup before him, admiring the tea leaves within it once again.

Both Thackery and the Hatter blinked, obviously forgetting for a moment where they were -- and that they had an audience. As they looked at the others, they both returned back to the world around them, the Hatter smiling slightly as he turned back to look at Alice, whereas Thackery resorted to going back to throwing a sugar lump across the other side of the table. Well, at least the argument between the two of them had come to an end.

"Alice, dear, what would you prefer for this piece of toast? Marmalade, blackberry jam, strawberry jam, blueberry, gooseberry, raspberry, apricot ..."

"Mustard!"

Before he began spinning off more of a list (or attempted to kill Thackery for his interference of a suggestion once again) , Alice quickly grabbed the nearest jam to her -- which was blueberry -- and offered it to the Hatter. Knowing what he was like, Alice just assumed it would be better to agree with his insistence of her eating something instead of just trying to fight it, knowing all too well that if she didn't he'd only find some way to force her into eating it or end up getting upset about the whole matter -- or both. He'd been known to do that quite a lot of the time when she'd disagreed with him on past occasions.

He took the pot out of her hands and smiled, looking from the label back to Alice as he did so.

"A most excellent choice!"

Alice once again sighed and rolled her eyes, turning to look at Chessur who was grinning widely back at the two of them.

Such events had been the same ever since after the Queens ball, where she had confessed to the Hatter and found out that they shared the same feelings for one another. After their little rendezvous in the garden, both he and Alice had returned to the ball, both beaming from ear to ear -- and Alice wondering to herself if the night could be anymore perfect than it already was. They never left the others sight for the rest of the night, and became even harder to separate then they had been beforehand. It had proved harder when the party was over, and Alice had to retire to her room. The Hatter had followed her to her door, but when they had both reached it Alice noticed
the worried expression that lay on his face. Even now, sitting at the table where she has having brunch with their friends, Alice still remembered the last conversation that they had had that night very clearly within her mind.

Alice turned around, smile still on her face. That was, until she met the Hatter's expression staring straight back at her. In his expression, she noticed he was sad, almost worried about something – no matter how hard he was trying to hide it from her. Her own smile fell slightly, and her brow furrowed in concern.

"Tarrant? What's wrong? You were so happy just a moment ago." She asked, taking a hold of one of his hands as she did so.

His smile fell slightly too, and Alice guessed it was because she knew something was wrong. He tore his gaze from her and looked down at their hands, looking as nervous as he had done earlier on within the evening. Alice watched as he struggled to piece the correct words together in his mind to express what he was trying to say to her. Alice just remained there, looking at him, waiting for the answer she knew he would eventually give her – given time.

"I am happy. Very happy. Happier than I have been for a long time in fact. Perhaps even happier than when you decided to stay here, I'm not sure..." He shook his head then, as if trying to get rid of a hundred things in his mind and replace them with all the right things he wanted to say. Alice noticed him glance up at her then, and she knew instantly that he was going to continue with his explanation. "It's just, I haven't been this happy in so long, that I worry ... when I wake up, this will all be but a dream. And that, we'll just return to being ... two mad friends instead of-

"Instead of two mad people who are very much in love?" She finished for him.

They looked back at each other then, and Alice saw the trace of a small smile fall back on his face at her answer. She pulled him into a hug then, and felt him respond by putting his arms around her tightly.

"What will it take to assure you that my feelings aren't going to change from now till morning? I should know, I've been battling to understand them for the longest time now," She pulled away from him slightly so she could look him in the face, noticing that some of the worry that had been there before had already faded away. "When you wake up tomorrow, and when we next see each other – things won't have changed, you'll see. And then you'll know that this isn't a dream, that it is all very much real."

The two of them broke apart from their embrace them, both smiling at one another, the worry that Alice had seen in the Hatter's expression completely gone now and replaced by nothing but love and trust.

"You always did know exactly what to say, dear Alice."

He leant into her then, and just like they had outside by the pond with only the light of the moon as their witness, Alice found that her lips met with his in a kiss. It warmed her heart to know that it was still just as magical and special as it had been the first time – if not more so – and she felt herself responding in no time. She was however; very much upset when he decided to pull away; leaving her wanting to pout like a child. As he looked down at her the Hatter merely laughed at her expression, and the two of them looked back at one another.

"Goodnight, sweet Alice."

"Yes. Goodnight, Tarrant." Alice replied, and watched as he turned to walk away, leaving her
standing outside the door to her room alone.

Alice couldn't help the smile that grew on her face, and as she turned to open the door to her room, tried to recall a night that had ever meant so much to her in the past. Failing to think of anything, she walked in – knowing all too well that everything was simply perfect in the world then.

Alice found herself quickly dodging yet another sugar lump that Thackery had decided to throw in her direction, and she turned to look at him as he broke into his manic laughter again. She sighed. Yes, things had continued to be very much the same since that night all those months ago – the only thing really changing being that of the Hatters mood since the two of them had become a couple. He no longer become as angry as he used to be – well, not unless Thackery was being most annoying and throwing spoons around the place; which was understandable and would make anyone angry. Not only had he become happier, Alice noticed that sometimes, he became more ... difficult at times, so to speak. The current tea party around her was enough of an example of that, what with his constant arguing over the little things that seemed to somehow annoy him, and how he had pretty much forced her into allowing him to prepare some toast for her even though she wasn't that hungry. In fact, if Alice was correct, she would say that his behaviour that morning was out of some sort of nervousness - and not just him being generally difficult. Not that Alice had much of an idea of what he had to be nervous over, as far as she knew everything was fine for him. More than fine in fact.

"Here Alice."

Alice turned and noticed a piece of toast being shoved under her nose. Kindly, she took it out of the Hatters hand and smiled, beginning to eat it. She was rather surprised to find it wasn't cold, especially with how he'd been waving it around for quite a while. As she continued to eat, the others around the table returned back to their random conversations, of which made little to no sense to her at all. Still, Alice would expect nothing more out of them, and she smiled to herself as she listened to their discussions. As was what seemed to have become a tradition at the table as of late, at one point Thackery broke out into song – this time however singing something which Alice could only make out as referring to 'beautiful soup'. Still very much confused over the lands hidden cultures, Alice decided that she really must learn more of the songs and poems within Underland one day, as she was sure this song he had chosen to sing was one she was not familiar with.

When the party was over and it was time for her to return to the castle, the Hatter ran to her side so that he could escort her back. Both of them missed Chessur's mischievous grin from behind their backs, but when Alice turned around to say 'Fairfarren' to the remainder of her friends, it was as if nothing was out of the ordinary with them.

The two of them continued to walk on, and Alice noticed that for once, the Hatter was unusually quiet during the journey, only speaking every now and again unlike the usual rambling that she was so used to hearing from him. When she turned to glance at him she noticed the furrowed brow on his face, and shortly afterwards she stopped walking in her tracks, grabbing hold of his arm as she did so, making him stop also. He turned to her, his face blank with curiosity, to which she smiled right back at him.

"Alright Tarrant, it's just us now. Are you going to tell me what has you acting so strangely at this moment in time?"

She watched his expression change slightly – Alice knew he was probably shocked that she could read him like an open book. But then again, when hadn't she been able too? – and then he smiled slightly.
"I didn't know I was acting so strangely, to be quite truthful. In fact, I was most certain I was acting in my normal nature."

Alice merely raised an eyebrow at him, walking forward slightly as she did so. Oh no, he would not weasel out of this that easily.

"Oh really? Then would you care to explain why you were looking so confused a moment ago, and why you weren't talking about a number of wonderfully fascinating things as you usually do?"

She watched him as he searched her face for something, and then he sighed in defeat, as if he was a little child who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Alright fine, you caught me. As usual nothing is able to sneak past my dear, smart Alice." He paused, and turned away from her, looking down at the leaves by his feet. "I was thinking ... about something. Well, I was thinking about a lot of things to be completely honest. Such as, - is blueberry really your preferred flavour jam? And, the confused expression that was on your face when Thackery was singing –"

"Wait, you noticed how confused I was then?"

"But of course! You see Alice, when it comes to you, not much slips past my knowledge either."

Alice just shook her head then, smiling as she did so. Of course he would notice such things of her behaviour; she just didn't think she was that easy for him to read.

"Why do I get the feeling those weren't the only two things you were thinking about?" She asked, looking back up at him as she did so. Alice noticed then that as she asked that, the Hatter's nervousness had all but returned to him.

"Well, no – I was thinking about ... other ... things as well. But, one main thought came to mind. It's, come to my mind quite a bit lately actually, and I've thought about it quite a lot."

"And? Are you going to share with me what's on your mind? It must be something important if it's grabbed your attention so much."

The Hatter shuffled on his feet slightly, kicking the leaves from beneath him. As he did so Alice noticed that it never occurred to her that Underland could possibly have changing seasons also. From what she could tell, they were most likely in what would be the equivalent of Autumn back in her world.

"I was, thinking a lot about ... our future, actually. Our future; together."

Alice turned to look back up at him then, and noticed that he was now looking right back at her. That reply was not one she had been honestly expecting, and she only wondered where he was going with the whole thing now he'd begun.

Obviously sensing her bewilderment, the Hatter turned fully to face her, pulling her hand away from his arm and bringing her other hand to it, so that he could hold both of them. He looked back at her, and she noticed that in his eyes – which were bright green in colour at that moment in time – past all the nervousness that habited them there, was nothing but love and devotion.

"Alice, I know you, and I know that you don't ever like being told what to do, or being thrown into a certain direction, and I would never, never force you into a decision unless it was something that could honestly bring you happiness. But at the same time, I know my feelings for you – and, I
know how much I love you, and that won't change ... well, ever really." He paused, frowning for a moment, but then carried on speaking. "Alice, my dearest, sweetest Alice. Would it be absolutely insane to ask if, perhaps one day – you would consider ... m – marrying a madman?"

Alice stared back at him then, shock falling over her. Had he just – inadvertently – proposed to her? She was sure he had. Even if the intentions behind it weren't direct, and weren't intended as an actual proposal today, in that moment – he had meant it as such for a later date. For a time in which, she was ready.

She knew her decision almost instantly after he had spoken, the time afterwards being nothing but a short distraction as she absorbed the information into her mind. Slowly, she removed her hands from his grasp and – even before he could be overcome with fear at her answer, placed her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her and only her. And she smiled back at him with one of the most happiest and cheerful of smiles that she had within her.

"How long would we have to wait for this 'one day', might I ask?"

And as quickly as that, Alice knew that he understood what she meant, and what her answer was. She watched his own face break out into a smile then, and watched as he continued to play along with her game.

"Oh, I'm not sure. A month? A year? Five years? I suppose whenever you would feel most comfortable with the idea. I can be a very patient man when I wish to be you know? Especially if what I'm waiting for is worth the wait."

Alice giggled then, and leant forward slightly.

"Well, it's a good job that there's no real concept of time in this world, isn't there?"

She saw the Hatter's brow furrow slightly, a slight confusion setting in.

"I'm sorry Alice, I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that you-"

"Yes Tarrant," She interrupted. Honestly, the man sometimes spent too much time over thinking the simplist of things. "I'm saying that I would be overjoyed to marry you."

And before he could question her decision for any possible flaws – knowing him he'd find something to question about – Alice broke the space between them and kissed him on the lips, smiling as she did so. After a brief moment, she felt his arms wrap around her, and pull her in closer as she wrapped her own arms around his neck.

After what felt like both forever and hardly any time at all, the Hatter broke apart suddenly, burrowing down into the depths of his pocket with one hand whilst the other was still wrapped around Alice's waist.

"Well, seeing as you agreed much easier and sooner than I originally thought you would, I have a gift for you."

She turned and watched as he continued to search, listening to him mutter some nonsense as he searched for the missing item. She let out a small laugh at his current predicament, wondering just how many things were calling home in his pocket.

"It's not a singing gift is it?" Alice found herself asking, remembering one of their conversations a while ago where the Hatter had mentioned something about singing rings. Ever since she heard such a thing, Alice couldn't help but be slightly unnerved and intrigued at the idea of a ring, singing. She wasn't sure weather to fascinated by such a thing, or rather annoyed at the idea of a
ring that would never cease singing even when you wanted it to. Still, once again, she shouldn't have been shocked at learning of such a thing's existence really.

At her comment, she heard the Hatter laugh as he continued his search.

"Don't be silly, as wonderful as a singing ring would be I think it was pretty obvious that you didn't exactly embrace that idea. To be quite honest I'm not sure such a thing would be a good idea anyway; I'd get highly jealous of it you know?"

"And knowing my luck, I would get highly annoyed at such a ring myself." Alice replied, earning another chuckle from the man next to her.

Suddenly, he looked up, achievement written all over his and Alice knew he had found the very thing he had been searching for. Removing his arm from around her waist, he went to remove a small piece of fabric that had decided to cling on to the small box he was currently holding, letting the fabric fall to the ground. Happy that it was up to scratch, Alice watched as the Hatter turned, offering the box for her to take. She did, and began to open it slowly, waiting in anticipation to see what was inside.

And as she came face to face with the ring, she let out a small gasp. Before her, was the most beautiful ring Alice ever did see. It was small, and delicate – yet that only helped to make it even more beautiful. It was silver too, yet in the middle of it there was a small blue stone. She smiled as she continued to look at it, honestly shocked at how simple yet wonderfully perfect it was.

"Do you like it?" A small voice from beside her asked.

Alice turned, and came face to face with the Hatters loving expression. Her smile was enough answer he needed, and he stepped towards her slightly.

"Here, let me help you with that." He replied, helping her slide the beautiful ring onto her finger. She was shocked to learn that it fit perfectly – not too small and not too big. As her smile grew, she looked up at the Hatter, and went to hug him once again. He wrapped his arms around her once more, and Alice felt him bury his head into her hair.

They remained like that for a short while, just embracing as the reality of what they had just agreed upon setting into both of their minds. Alice Kingsley, the Queen of stubbornness, the young girl who others would think was so against having her future decided for her, was engaged. And in Alice's eyes, she was engaged to the most wonderful man she would ever have the pleasure of knowing in her lifetime. As that thought fell to her mind, she heard the Hatters voice quietly beside her ear.

"You do know what this means for us next, don't you?"

She didn't make any attempt to move out of the embrace, only shaking her head slightly in response then. Well, she knew they'd have to get married some time, after all that was the whole point of a proposal in the first place, but Alice knew better and could guess that that was not what he was referring to.

"Well, now that we're properly engaged, we have to make it official knowledge sometime. Which means ..."

Alice – suddenly wary of where the conversation was going, pulled apart slightly so she could look up at him in the face. She noticed that he was now wearing a rather large grin.

"Which means what?"
She watched as his grin only grew, and suddenly she felt an unexplainable sinking feeling within the pit of her stomach.

"In order to make our engagement official, we need the blessing of the Queen."

Ah, so that was why Alice had the familiar feeling of nervousness within her. Of course, visiting their friend was very much a good thing. But Alice could only guess how that person would react to learning of their recent news.

And as she remembered the times of the Queens knowing smiles, the pressing of the matter on how she felt about the Hatter before Alice even knew for herself that she loved him: Alice wasn't quite sure how to react to such knowledge.
A Royal Blessing

Alice was finding reality very hard to believe at that moment in time. Very hard.

After all; she had enough reason to not be believing anything that was happening to her right then. It had started as a normal day for Alice; she had woken up that morning as usual, got dressed as usual, and even had breakfast as usual. She could honestly say that she was expecting nothing but a normal day ahead of her, expecting nothing less than seeing her friends, experiencing a normal tea party with a few of those very beings, and perhaps even having some time alone with the person she loved the most. If, however, someone had in fact told her that morning that all that was to happen, yet more on top of it that she could only ever dream of – well, Alice would have simply laughed in that persons face, rejecting the concept they had thrown at her.

Only, more did happen, and right now – Alice was feeling like she was very much in a dream. After all, it's not every day that a girl is proposed to by the person they love. It's not every day that something happens that can make a person feel like they're floating on the clouds, as free as a bird with their own elated happiness. But that was the perfect description as to what Alice's very feelings were right then as she walked back to the castle, one of her arms wrapped around the Hatter with one of his arms wrapped tightly around her. The two of them were lost in deep conversation, large smiles currently reigning on their faces as they did so. Alice had noticed that now what was previously worrying him was no longer a problem, the Hatter had returned to babbling about a hundred fascinating things as he usually would, and her smile only continued to grow as she listened to his ramblings. Well, she couldn't understand much of what he was saying, and even if she could; if she was quite honest with herself not a lot of it was sinking into her mind right then. For her mind was still baffled over what reality had decided to throw on the two of them.

She was engaged. Engaged to the Hatter no less. And no matter how many times she repeated that phrase over and over again in her mind, Alice couldn't help but admire how perfectly right and natural it sounded. In the past, whenever she heard the words 'engagement' in any context relating to her, Alice would roll her eyes – disgusted at the idea of having her future decided for her constantly by her own mother. She knew her mother meant well in her own way, but Alice couldn't help but be stubborn and stand for what it was she wanted and believed in, and having decisions made for her - without any input on her part - it was one of the things that she hated most. But now, the word engagement meant more to her than being forced into something against her will. She'd actually agreed to be wed, by herself, and Alice knew that she would never find any greater happiness then being with the Hatter himself. She had actually agreed to marry the madman that was walking beside her, and nothing ever seemed more perfect in the world.

Alice almost wanted to laugh as she thought back to her mother then. Why, what would she think of her if she saw her right now, and how happy she was? Well, she'd probably be furious at first – especially since she hadn't quite given Hamish any answer about his proposal, although her leaving should have been enough of an indication about her thoughts on the matter. Alice hoped that her mother would approve of the Hatter though, eventually, once she was given time to understand the situation and get to know him. As she thought about that, Alice wondered what the Hatter would think of her mother. Surely the two would get along marvellously, eventually, right? Perhaps maybe one day that very theory would be put to the test...

"Oh look Alice, we're here."

Alice looked up then as the Hatters voice broke her out of her current train of thought, and there indeed – was the castle before them. She suddenly felt her stomach doing a belly flip within her.
They were back – yes, that much was true – but now the both of them had the task of telling the Queen of their new relationship status. Well, it wouldn't be that bad, and after all Alice wanted to tell her friend of the news, more than anything. She would however, be rather silly to not admit that she was secretly worried over what her friend's reaction would be towards the whole situation. She'd be happy for them of course, but what would that mean afterwards?

As if sensing how she had suddenly become tense as they stopped before the castle, Alice felt the Hatter release his grip from around her waist, and watched as he walked so he was in front of her, turning to face her so they were looking back at one another. He reached out and took hold of one of her hands, his eyes never leaving hers as he did so.

"We don't have to do this today, you know? If you don't want to. We can wait and tell her the news another day, if you preferred."

Alice just smiled back at him, touched at how charming and caring he was to her. After staring back at him for a short moment, she shook her head, knowing her decision had been made before he even asked her if she wanted to wait.

"No Tarrant, we don't have to do that. I want to tell her, I really do. And anyway –"She held up her other hand then, the one that held the engagement ring on her finger. "I think she'd find out soon enough even if we didn't tell her. Considering I didn't leave the castle wearing this this morning. She's rather clever on taking notice of the small details."

She watched as his own smile grew at that, and Alice knew he was happy to see her wearing the ring he had given her.

"Well, dear Alice – that may be true. But I still believe that no one is nearly as smart as you, my dear."

He held out his arm for her again, and she took it, smiling back up at him as he continued to speak.

"Now if you are most sure that you want us to share with Mirana our most wonderful news on this fine day, then we shall carry on our journey."

The two of them continued to walk on towards the castle, Alice's nervousness disappearing slightly with every step they took. It was true; they really didn't have much choice as to when to tell Mirana. If they didn't tell her till later, knowing Alice's luck Mirana would find out in her own way – and then when she did she would probably continue to pester Alice about how she hadn't told her straight away, not to mention how she would want to know each individual detail on as to how the Hatter had come to ask for her hand in the first place. It was probably for the best that they decided to tell her now rather than later.

And Mirana was just as cheerful as she always was when she saw the two of them walking in her sitting room, her usual smile appearing on her face as the two of them entered. She got up from where she was seated, and walked over to meet them in the middle of the room, smile never leaving her face for a moment.

"Alice, welcome back! I was beginning to wonder where you'd got to actually, even though I had a rather good idea in my mind. And Tarrant! Why, it is lovely to see you once again."

Both Alice and the Hatter nodded in agreement, trying not to reveal their secret before they told the woman, although it was proving difficult as Alice was trying to fight the urge to break out into a wide smile.
"And what brings the two of you here ... together?" Alice watched as the woman's smile turned into the wickedly cunning one she'd seen too many times before – and Alice could only wonder about the thoughts that were currently passing through the Queens mind.

"Mirana – we, have something we'd like to tell you –"

"And something we'd like to ask of you too." The Hatter interrupted, looking back at Alice as if to remind her as to why they were telling her of their secret. Oh yes, the blessing. How could she have forgot?

Mirana raised an eyebrow at the two of them, curiosity evident in her expression.

"Well? What is it? Are you two asking for a room in the castle, by any chance? Because I can give you one, not that I agree that it would be proper for the two of you to be involved in that sort of behaviour when you're not even married yet but – I guess I could turn a blind eye just this once _"

"No! That won't be necessary ..." Alice interjected, knowing all too well she was probably as red as a beetroot at that moment. Oh dear, the conversation had only just started, and Alice knew that if Mirana continued acting the way she was, Alice would be speechless by the end of it.

Mirana, seemingly unaffected, laughed at Alice's outburst. Of course, Alice knew that her reaction was exactly what Mirana wanted, and she wished she could just bury herself in the Hatters arm as a small child would with their mothers when shy or embarrassed. So much for the Alice which carried much muchness.

"Oh, you know I'm only playing around with the two of you. I know that you're both respectable and – well controlled enough to wait." Mirana glanced back between the two of them - obviously taking pleasure in her current teasing at the couple - and continued to laugh. "But seriously, what is it you two wish to talk about?"

Alice –not knowing if she could speak in that moment or not – tugged on the Hatters sleeve lighty, giving him the silent sign that he should tell her their news. He looked down at her, and she noticed him smile as he looked at her embarrassed face. Perhaps, now thinking about it, waiting would have been a better idea after all. At least in that way Alice could have prepared herself for her friends teasing somewhat.

"Mirana – we, came to give you some news actually. Some rather good news; well, better than good in fact, wonderful news. At least, I – we think it is. In fact, I can't think of any news that would be more wonderful than this –"

"Hatter." Alice mumbled, sensing that if she didn't interrupt now he'd only continue to ramble for a very long time before he'd reach the actual point of the visit.

"...I'm fine." He looked back between Alice and Mirana again, trying to recall his train of thought. Momentarily, he continued to speak, obviously remembering the sentence that he was trying to reach before the interruption. "Anyway, what I'm trying to say is – me and Alice – Alice and I ... well. We're engaged."

They both looked back at Mirana then to see that she was, well, for once the speechless one. The woman's mouth was open in shock, as if not believing quite what she had just heard. Alice watched as Mirana's gaze went from her, to the Hatter, back to Alice again, as if searching for the clarification of the news from both of then. She then glanced down at Alice's hand for more evidence, and when she saw the ring on her finger – her smile returned, perhaps even larger than it had been previously; if such a thing were possible.
"Oh my, but that's simply wonderful! Congratulations to the both of you! Alice, you must show me your ring!"

Before Alice even had a chance to blink, Mirana was at her side, pulling her hand away to admire the ring on it. Alice watched her friend's awed expression, hands tracing the small and delicate ring on her finger. Alice smiled at her friend's interest, honestly elated with happiness with her reaction. After a moment, Mirana looked up, smile still strong on her face.

"It's so beautiful! And so very you Alice. Tarrant, you did a brilliant job picking this ring out for her." Her gaze went back to the ring for a moment, as if trapped in its mesmerizing beauty. Alice's smile only grew larger as she continued to watch Mirana, who was generally happy for the two of them.

"Do you two have any plans when the wedding will be?"

Alice blinked then, her brow furrowing slightly.

"W-we haven't decided yet," She replied, pulling her hand away as Mirana looked up once again at Alice. "We haven't really had much time to discuss anything in detail – Hatter only just proposed this afternoon and-"

"Only this afternoon?! My, you two really haven't had any time to discuss anything much have you? So, would it be too much to assume if the wedding will be anytime soon on the calendar, or if we have to wait for a while?"

"I." Alice began, not really knowing what to say. She didn't want to say something that would end up offending the Hatter after all, but at the same time she didn't want to seem too hasty to marry. In all honesty, she'd like to wait a short while – just so they could plan over it and make it perfect, but if she said that – how would the two of them react? Was such a thing ... normal in Underland? Having little to no knowledge of their customs anyway, was a wedding any different from what it would be back in her world? And it was fine deciding what it was she wanted, but what did he want? Alice knew that there was no possible way she would be happy making a decision without talking to the Hatter first and knowing what his thoughts and desires on the occasion were.

And then, as if coming to her rescue and sensing the current dilemma that was battling within her mind, the Hatter spoke up.

"We - need time to discuss it in more detail, really. But, I will leave it entirely up to Alice how soon we wait."

Alice turned around then, coming face to face with his loving and reassuring smile. She knew in that instance then, that no matter what she wanted, everything would be fine. He would wait for her forever if it came to it – not that Alice would ever leave him waiting that long. In a way, she thought she could sense that he didn't want to rush into anything too soon either.

"How delightfully lovely," Mirana said. Alice turned back to look at her, and noticed her smile had changed to one of warmth, and joy as she witnessed the two of them before her. Mirana stared at the two of them for a second longer, as if watching something that the two of them couldn't see themselves, and then her smile brightened up again to what it was previously.

"Oh! But when you two do decide, you must tell me! I would love to help arrange it, prepare for it – oh the ideas I have in my mind. You two deserve a grand wedding, and that is exactly what you shall get."

Alice, suddenly wondering what Mirana meant by 'grand' began to feel worried again. In all
honesty, she wasn't sure she liked the idea of a large wedding, with the two of them surrounded by people they hardly knew, if that was indeed what Mirana meant. Alice kind of liked the idea of having a smaller wedding – with only their friends being there for them. Still, she guessed it would simply be another thing that they would have to talk and find some agreement on at a later date.

"Does this mean, that your giving us your blessing?" Alice heard the Hatter ask from beside her.

Oh yes! Right; that was what they had come for after all. The royal blessing, something that Alice somehow knew meant a lot in Underland, and for the people who lived there. She shook her head slightly to wake her from her slight daze, and turned to look at Mirana in a hopeful way. The answer was pretty obvious giving the Queen's reaction, yet for the two of them actually hearing her say it meant so much more.

"Why, of course you two have it! Is that all you were worrying over? My, I can't think of any other couple in Underland that deserve and are meant for each other as much as you two. I thought it would have been obvious that I would happily give you my blessing. You are both very dear to me after all."

At that, Alice couldn't help but be overjoyed by her friends words. She broke out of the Hatters grip and ran to Mirana, hugging her when she finally broke the gap between them.

"Oh thank you Mirana! Thank you so much!"

Alice heard both Mirana and the Hatters laughter resonate in her ears, and she felt the Queen hug her back softly.

"Silly girl, you have nothing to be thanking me for! I'm just so very happy that the both of you have finally found true happiness, together."

And for what was probably the hundredth time that day, Alice felt she was going to explode with the happiness she was currently feeling inside her. For in her eyes, everything was simply perfect in the world, and there was no possible force that could ever ruin things for both her and the Hatter.

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