The In-Between

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Summary

For RainTulgey's writing contest. Metamorphosis snippet in Reginald's perspective.

Reginald had dealt with disastrous evenings before. Throw enough tea parties and you're bound to have a few--well--evenings that leave you with a taste in your mouth worse than the taste of mustard itself (yes, gasp). He had been thrown out of places, had thrown others out of places, and had thrown other things--vases, fruits, the occasional duck--at other people as they ran out of places. You live the wild life, you're going to have wild nights. And--disappointing nights.

He kept waiting--he kept waiting for this night to get disappointing. He kept waiting for the moment where Alice would slam her blinds with a hissed, "Goodnight." He kept waiting to be left out in the cold so he could just walk home, but...but it didn't happen. That is, she stayed out there. Talking with him. He admitted, they weren't all the kindest words (but he liked his woman as he liked his tea: sarcastic--wait, that doesn't--).

Gah. He put on a calm demeanor you know, but inside? Inside, he could hardly speak. All the mini-Reginalds in his brain were sputtering on their tea as they saw the sight before their eyes, shouting, "Retreat! Retreat!"

He tried batting his ear to make him stop, but she scrutinized him when he did that, so he instead made an attempt to not be a loony, for once. At least, not that sort of loony.

Oh, there were many sides of the loon spectrum, and he could choose a more romantic one than that.

"Why do you call me that?"

Reginald had been so intensely focused on the conversation that he had forgotten what it was
about. Alice had that effect on people, you know. She's very tricky like that. He bit his lip and put some brain power into--oh, yes, right, crickets. He remembered now.

He began to smile, a small one in the darkness. "There’s a cricket living in the floorboards beneath my bed that chirps all night long. I can’t catch the bloody thing, try as I might, and the chirping keeps me awake. For two or three nights in a row, at times." he paused; for a second, he thought he heard the chirping in his ear, but no. He continued on. "It’s not an unpleasant sound, that I’ll admit, but a fellow does need his sleep."

He waited for Alice's response--for the swooning and the, "Oh, Reginald, you Cassanova!"--whoever he was--and the part where she let down her long hair or at least opened the door for him so he could look her in the eyes instead of squinting up at her (though this was a good angle, he supposed, nice lighting and all).

He waited in vain. Instead, Alice made a face. "You named me after a thing that vexes you."

Reginald faltered. Oh. Yeah, he--hadn't looked at it that way, but, er...his subconscious could be a beast sometimes. Heh. Quick--think of something before the blinds slammed down on this conversation. "Well--"

"Very fitting." She said it, not him. "Well, I may chirp sometimes, but I certainly don't go creeping about beneath beds."

"True, that." He tapped his chin and added in a stage whisper, glancing around, "At least, as far as I know..."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her and let his suppressed grin go. It may have been the lighting again--oh, bless the lighting--but he could have sworn she smiled just for a moment. Before she let herself get to her. It fell quickly, at any rate, and replaced itself with a self-contained poit.

"Nor," she continued, "do I keep you awake at night. Rather--rather, it seems to be the other way arou..."

Heartbeats can hurt, you know, a shock of pain with every pulse. Reginald clutched his chest and, brows raised, his smile froze. There was so much stuffing in his head. Good thoughts. Terrible thoughts. Thoughts he could control, and thoughts that were like an impulse, like a shot in the head...

And then there was his Cricket, standing currently above him. She...if it weren't for her, would he be able to surmount the mad nights? The lonely nights when he thought of the hole his family left? Or the nights when he couldn't stop shaking--could he face that?

"Oh, on the contrary." He caught her eye and laughed--it was hollow. "You do."

There was a silence. He looked down at a spot on her wall for a while and half-expected, when he looked up, for Alice to be nothing but a silhouette against the shutters. But she was never more "there", if that made sense, than right now.

She studied him with the same contemplation as a scientist looking through the microscope--not quite believing what she saw, but unable to catch it any other way. He returned the glance. It warmed him up. He was able to smile again.

"Come now." He raised his voice. "Is it really going to take a bear, Cricket?"

"Two bears," came the quick reply. But it wasn't heated, not yet, so he had that going for him.
"Ah." Hopefully-but-not-too, he said, "Must they have rabies, too?"

She lifted her chin. "Of course."

Naturally.

"Well--" He leaned against the house and feigned exhaustion. "Why bother, then? Even if I was victorious, I would suffer a bite wound--and then you'd have to take me out back and shoot me."

He didn't look up to see if she smiled at that image. Bet she did. He'd bet one thousand of any currency or fuzzy mammal in the world she did. For some reason that pleased him.

"I'd prefer a happy ending, personally," he added.

Then he looked up. Alice looked down at him, her head cocked to the side.

She then said some very intellectual things. Namely, "What may or may not constitute a happy ending is the eye of the beholder, sir." Sir. That's a pet name, isn't it? It could be. He kept his hopes up. "I myself doubt there are any bears in this parts. I've yet to see one, and I'm fairly certain you haven't, either."

He raised his eyebrows and almost took her up on that challenge. Almost told her a half-contrived story of how he had gotten his white hair (hint: bear pirates--you never expect 'em), but as he opened his mouth, he stopped.

"No bears, eh?" He coughed, and raised his finger. "I take it, then, that you've never encountered me at a time when the tea runs out--hmm?"

Her face disappeared against her arms, but her shaking gave her away--Reginald's smiled so hard his cheeks hurt. Laughter? On this dark and dreary night, shivering on the ground as it were, had he made Alice laugh?

Armageddon came faster than he thought.

Still, he closed his eyes and listened to the laughter for a bit. The peals of laughter. He wanted to remember it for darker times. Not to get into that box now, though. This was a moment to savor.

And, like all moments, it ended. Her laughter came to a shuddering halt. When he opened his eyes, she avoided them. She looked straight ahead, her arms crossed. Looked like it pained her. Had he done that to her--just because he made her laugh? You can't win with Alice, and yet...you can't really lose, either.

"Come down, sweet cricket," he nearly plead.

She giggled at this, to which he sighed. Come on, now. He had put the theatrics in it and everything, and what did she do? Laugh?

"Please come down?" He had her attention now--time for the pull. Or what should have been the pull. Instead, he rambled a bit. "We'll sit on your porch swing and watch the fireflies dance. We'll talk, too, or--" He added with a guarded gesture towards her, "Perhaps we won't talk. We can sit in perfect silence, if you like. If it pleases you."

He nearly had her--that's what he'd tell his grandchildren one day, if he ever survived her torment to have those--when he recounted the story. He'd tell them how she bit her finger, and how she looked him over, and how from the balcony up there, she looked like a perfect figure of a Juliet. He'd say that last bit for the sake of description, because he had never actually sat through the play
(if it's over two hours long and it says "wherefore" and is totally serious about it, he just can't).

But, point being, she evoked poetry from him.

He'd leave out the bit where she turned away and murmured, hand on the shutters--"No."

They both seemed surprised to hear it. Reginald was the one that sputtered, though. He wrung his-more noticeably as the moments passed--empty hands. "Why not?"

"Because--" She leaned over the balcony a bit. "Because it's cold outside."

He tilted his head. "I'll keep you warm."

He'd also leave out the bit where she burst into a pit of (actually quite interesting) rage and shouted, "Don't tempt me!" The future and maybe non-existant grandkids wouldn't want to hear about that.

Also, he'd have to tell about how his heart skipped like twelve beats as Alice glared at him--but it steadied as the glare thinned out and he saw the real issue behind those eyes: fear.

"I'm sorry," she said, and the kicker: she seemed to mean it. "I can't. And please. Stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?" said Reginald, presumably so he could stop doing that.

She waved him off. "Looking at me."

Oh. He tutted. Nope. Can't stop doing that.

"Well, I like to look at you," he said, then hesitantly, "Should I not?"

He crossed his fingers and wished on whatever star had a free moment.

"It's not the looking itself that matters," Alice confided miserably, yet not so. "It's how you do it. You shouldn't look at me like that."

Reginald's brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because..." Her voice cracked; it was more of a whisper, really. A broken whisper of a little girl who had ran to the land of her secret dreams and gotten exactly what she wished. "Because I like it."

That's when he understood it.

Or he thought he understood it.

If he had ever understood anything ever.

Which was actually sort of doubtful.

Nevertheless.

There were two Alices: there was the Alice who stuck her figurative tongue out at whatever he said and took his vocal love letters to the mental shredder. That Alice seemed to hate him and he had no luck with Alice.
But he was pretty sure that Alice was a figment of his imagination, as he had just heard the other Alice speak.

Stay with him here.

This Alice had a touch of the same curiosity in her that had propelled her into Wonderland the first place—and must have the second time. This Alice had rebellion hot enough to run away, and the bravery to never look back. This one was honest, and she spoke to Reginald in laughter and sometimes—in this case, at least—in actual nice words. Or begging words.

Well, then, he would just have to cater to that Alice, then—the night was young and her balcony—not that high. He’d just have to make do and do something unexpected.

He reached up as high as he could on his toes (if any indication by his shoes, this was rather far) and with all of his might, he lunged for her. This might have looked silly, he supposed, from a bystander’s perspective—but he tried hard! He really wanted to touch her, to make sure she was real...he didn’t know why, but he did.

All the while, she watched him, drawn back enough that if he caught her it would have to be by divine intervention, but enough to show the spark of that curiosity in her eye. Yes, it had changed in its nature over the year, but it was there.

It was there.

But it was so far away, and she certainly wasn’t helping—just looking at him like that. Like he was going to pop up and scare her.

Only so many times can one throw themselves off the ground for no result, and he had underestimated the balcony. Reginald rested his head on the wall and raised his hands in defeat. "As you wish, then. I’ll let you be."

He heard a sigh, and looked up. First he saw a hand. Then an arm, reaching up to the balcony, where Alice was half-leaning over the ledge. Not so far, now. Maybe—maybe if he just lifted his toes a little, and he closed his eyes, and the wind was blowing just right...

Their fingertips touched.

Just for a second—then she darted away, shut the window and turned off the light. Reginald opened his eyes. He was in the dark, alone, and all he had to show for it was some tingling fingertips.

Was that proper defeat, then? Of course not. No, there had been— he thought he—for the first time, he wasn’t alone in this—

No matter. He would wait until morning to sort it out. Until that point, though...who said he had to go home?

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