The Red Country

by jibrailis

Summary

Before Alice ever fell down the rabbit-hole, there were two girls who found Wonderland first and who became, respectively, the White Queen and the Queen of Hearts. [Alice in Wonderland prequel].

Notes

With a fanmix by subluxate! [link here]

With music by martinius! [link here]

The heart is not a hollow muscular organ but a dog that leaps out of its pen, swallows a lesser of its species, and so is slowly choked, while astonished and coughing it staggers away with spit and gastric juices gushing from its jaws. Baudelaire wanted the heart to sleep like a beast: “Résigne-toi, mon couer; dors ton sommeil de brute,” but the heart never sleeps: when even the animals have stripped down, it remembers the time when the forests still stood and shadows fell like trees.

-- Carsten Rene Nielsen, translated by David Keplinger
ACT I
THE NAMING OF THE ANIMALS

A monster moved through the darkness as Helen woke fitfully from her sleep. The air was honey thick but not nearly so sweet, and she struggled to breathe as she fumbled with the blankets over her body. The shadow crept closer, and Helen's arms prickled in gooseflesh like flags on a military campaign map. She sat up straight, her back pressed to the wallpaper, and the shadow stood just in time for her to see that it was Frances rising from her hands and knees.

"What are you doing?" Helen hissed, careful to keep her voice lowered. There were four other girls sleeping in the room, not counting Frances' bed positioned closest to the door. Helen saw that the sheets had been pushed aside carelessly, leaving an empty cocoon where their owner was meant to be.

"I had a nightmare," Frances said, her dark curls wild around her face. Even in the shadows Helen could make out the swarthiness of her complexion, the startling devastation of her cheekbones.

Frances knelt beside the bed. Helen finally turned over and lifted the blanket, allowing Frances to slide into the bed with her. The mattress was insufficient, barely able to contain both of them, even though Frances was small of stature and Helen was none too tall either. Even so, she felt the insistent press of Frances' body beside hers, and then heard Frances' sigh, the warmth of her breath ghosting over Helen's collarbone.

"A nightmare," Helen murmured sleepily, beginning to feel more at ease. "Of what sort?"

Frances' fingers played with Helen's straw-coloured hair. "The nightmarish sort."

"Well, that is hardly descriptive at all," Helen murmured. She turned her face into her scratchy pillow and yearned for the pillow she had at home, sewn by her mother and stuffed with feathers — a luxury for a family of their means, but her mother had once been fond of pampering her before Helen grew old and went away. "Was there blood? Was there gruesome murder? Was there —"

She stopped, her tongue screeching to a halt. Quickly, she turned back over. "Forgive me, I did not mean to make light of—"

"It does not matter," Frances said.

"Let's speak of other things," Helen said diplomatically. "Let's not talk about nightmares."

"Ah," Frances said, "but that exhausts most of my conversational abilities." Her mouth quirked upwards dryly, in the way Frances' mouth was wont to do. It made her seem old and self-aware, like one of those spinster women Helen saw when she visited the village, Miss Anderson and
Miss Carson, who smiled and smiled at the troops of Montclair girls like they could foresee their secret downfall. Helen admired Miss Anderson and Miss Carson for being independent women of their own means; however, she wished they would not smile at the schoolgirls such, for she did not know what it signified.

And Helen was a girl of quick wits and deft accomplishments, the Head Girl at the Montclair School for Girls. She knew what many things signified.

"You are thinking," Frances observed.

Helen shook her head. She glanced at the other girls in the room. There was Agatha Gilbert, Dolores Kember, Catherine Walton, and Martha Corrick. None of them had ever crawled into her bed in the middle of the night, not even when they had been chits and much more prone to teary homesickness.

"I am tired," she said.

"No, you can't be tired," Frances replied. "I can't sleep, so someone must stay awake and keep me entertained. I demand it."

"You can't simply demand—"

"Can I not?" Frances asked. Helen looked at her friend, at Frances' unwavering gaze. She sighed.

"You know I must wake early to help the teachers arrange the classrooms," she said.

"You help them too much."

"They are our teachers," Helen said patiently. "And I am Head Girl."

"You are a girl and you do possess a head, which may even be a fine one," Frances said, "but that does not mean much of anything." She pressed her knees more insistentely against Helen's side. "You were in the nightmare, you know. There was a monster, scaled and grim, breathing fire that scorched the earth. I was on fire. I was burning. But you came and you poured water over me, and then you faced the monster while I hid behind you and cowered."

"A scaled and fiery monster," Helen repeated. Her head still felt full of cotton; she could see the moon clearly through the thin linen curtains and could estimate the lateness of the hour. The lateness or the dreadful earliness.

"Eyes of flame," Frances said. "The claws that catch. But you know which monster I mean." She spoke into Helen's shoulder. "It was the Jabberwock."

Half a league outside of Stratford upon Avon, and here, an education.

It was, perhaps, not the most prestigious boarding school for girls in England, but Helen was glad that it was not, for many of the girls currently attending Montclair could scarce afford prestige. What they could afford, and what they did pay Mr. Montclair and family to receive, was an acceptable education for young ladies of a certain class, a combination of scholarly knowledge and genteel refinement catered to the type of girl who would neither one day be a duchess, but nor would she sit on the corner of some damp London street selling poppies.
The girls who came to Montclair were the daughters of minor landed gentry, or the daughters of wealthy tradesmen hungry to rise above their station. They were clergymen's daughters, in the case of Helen whose father was a vicar, or the offspring of country squires. Some were the children of high-ranking government officials; some could name judges as their sires. There were a rare handful of girls whose fathers were members of the aristocracy proper, and who could claim connection to ancient titles. Catherine Walton was one of them, and acted as such, holding court over her little gaggle of younger girls, regaling them with tidbits of her upcoming Season. Frances was another, the daughter of a viscount and an Italian noblewoman, but — they did not speak much of Frances' bloodline in these parts, not without whispers.

Life at school was regimented and highly controlled, a vast world away from the relative freedom Helen had at home in Northumberland with her brothers and her mild-mannered parents. However, she enjoyed it nonetheless — Miss Brodie was fond of saying that if Helen Dunn had been born a man, she would no doubt become a military general. The wishy-washiness of her family had led them to financial ineptitude and a mountain of debt — why was it not better, then, to be organized and well-prepared?

Her practicality comforted her. Unlike many of her classmates, Helen had little hope in one day making a fine match and finding her fortune in that way. Oh, she knew she was of a respectable enough position to interest a certain type of young man, but respectable did not erase the thick scar that traveled down her nose between her eyes. She had been mauled by a neighbour's dog when she was ten years of age. So there it was. Helen Dunn would make a respectable wife, but she would be an ugly one. Therefore she had few aspirations in that account.

In the mornings she woke with the staff, getting dressed in the twilight, washing her face in the basin, slipping into her dress and her shoes, and then proceeding to the multitude of small tasks and ordinances that were her responsibility as Head Girl. She checked the linen stores, she took in the girls' mail, she patrolled the younger girls' quarters as they begin to stir, helping the very youngest with their questions and small morning confusions. She fetched a comb for one girl who was missing hers, and soothed another who had quarreled with her friend.

Then, breakfast in the great hall, the hundred or so girls of the school seated around twelve sturdy tables, eating their porridge and drinking their milk. Helen sat with Mr. Montclair and his family at the high table, along with the teachers, and Catherine Walton, who had paid for the privilege. They were allowed bread and rich, sweet butter.

Frances looked up at the high table occasionally and made a mocking expression that Helen ignored.

Then, their lessons: an hour of grammar, followed by an hour of history and geography, and then an hour of French, followed by one hour of artistic accomplishments — drawing, pianoforte, singing, dancing for the older girls once they were no longer so gangly in their bodies. Artistic accomplishments ended with luncheon. After luncheon there was arithmetic, conversation and social graces, more work on their artistic accomplishments, and then advanced tutoring sessions for the girls who might desire it — Helen had the opportunity to learn German with Miss Travers, who otherwise taught arithmetic. They ended with dinner, and then a retreat to the common room for handicrafts, as a woman's hands were never meant to be idle. Helen often used that time to work on her Berlin embroidery.

Frances, it could not be said, used any of handicraft time wisely. She had her own half-finished crochet on her lap, but she often lapsed the time staring out the window, refusing to join in the conversations of the other girls.

Soon the conversation turned low and disgruntled, and Helen, who had not been paying much
attention to it either, caught Agatha Gilbert saying something about a bracelet.

"You mentioned a bracelet?" Helen asked politely.

"Yes, a bracelet!" Agatha said. "It was a gift from my brother when he returned from France. I was telling the Honourable Miss Catherine that it has gone missing!"

"Miss Frances," Catherine Walton said sweetly. "Have you seen Miss Agatha's bracelet? I do recall the last time when one of my own pieces of jewelery went missing, it was you who turned it up."

Frances stared at them, her dark eyes like the burnt out memories of fire.

"Miss Frances found it on the floor, where it slipped out of your box," Helen said. "I am sure that if she found Miss Agatha's bracelet this time, she would say so."

"I am not so certain of that," muttered Sophie James, one of the younger girls who followed Catherine around everywhere. "Not when her father is a murderer."

"Her father is a viscount," Catherine said sharply. Sophie looked properly ashamed, and then Catherine smiled without kindness. "But he is also a murderer."

Frances remained silent.

"Have you nothing to say?" Catherine asked her. Her tone was venomous. So it had been almost since their first day at school, when Catherine had laughed at Frances and Frances had struck her so hard, her ring had cracked one of Catherine's front teeth. The crack was visible still. "So quiet and so recalcitrant! I can see why Mrs. Henley says you will never have any charm."

"That is quite enough," Helen said. She tired of Catherine and Frances' endless feud.

"I really can't see why you indulge her so," Catherine went on. "You must have a very kind and forgiving nature, Helen, but you realize you do not have to—"

"That is enough," Helen said loudly. "Is that what we do here at Montclair? Accuse our classmates and insult them?" She stood up and set her embroidery aside. "It would be a better use of our energies to search for Miss Agatha's bracelet instead. I am sure between us, we shall manage to find it." She headed towards their dormitory and, after a pause, the other girls followed her. All except for Frances, who, when Helen turned around to address her followers, was nowhere to be seen.

She found Frances later, in the gardens outside the manor, during the spare hour the girls had for their own amusements before curfew.

There was a patch of woods some distance away from Mrs. Henley's bare rose bushes. It grew alongside the path that led into town. Walking along it, they were far enough that the manor seemed smaller and less imposing when viewed from the woods, as most things were when one could take in their entirety with one curious gaze. However, the woods were close enough that they were still on Montclair property. It was large property; an ancestor of the Montclairs had once performed a favour for King George II. Frances lay beneath the shade of the outlying rowan trees, looking up at their evening-touched branches. Her legs were splayed and her skirts askew, an
indecent position should anyone else come by and notice her.

Helen called her name, and Frances craned her neck upwards, only slightly.

"Did you find Agatha's necklace?" she asked.

"No," Helen said, settling herself beside Frances, though she sat rather than lying supine. "She is quite convinced that it is your doing."

Frances smiled.

"You needn't look so pleased," Helen said. "Did you take it?"

"That ugly thing? Her brother must have scooped it out of a Parisian gutter," Frances said dismissively. Helen said nothing, having no particular opinion on the subject of jewelry or fashion. As far as she was concerned, a serviceable dress with the right hat and gloves to match were all she needed. Sapphire earrings and silver bracelets were for her betters. Catherine, Frances, and Agatha — whose family was not titled, but who was descended from those who had been — had their little baubles and could be fiercely protective of them in a way that Helen found exasperating.

"Do you think I'm a thief?" Frances asked, sliding her eyes towards Helen. She wore a blood-red brooch pinned precariously against her neckline.

"I know you grow bored," Helen said. "I know that you have never liked Agatha, because she is friends with Catherine, and you hate Catherine Walton with every ounce of your soul."

"Not every ounce, surely," Frances said. "I have plenty of hate for other subjects as well." She kicked up her feet into Helen's lap. Helen made to push her off, for Frances' shoes were not precisely clean, though they were, thankfully, free of spring mud. But the more she pushed, the more contrary Frances became — finally Helen stopped and allowed Frances' feet to settle against her thighs, the edge of her shoes dirtying Helen's plain grey skirt.

"What is there to hate?" Helen asked sensibly. "Certainly, there are girls at the school who are annoying, and there are teachers who would be better replaced by men and women of more stringent sense. But hate is such a strong passion, best saved for criminals and tyrants. I don't hate Catherine. I find her silly."

"Your mind must be very placid," Frances replied, "and very boring."

"As opposed to you?" Helen asked. "You can't keep your mind settled for even more than a minute."

"I am merely waiting for the right incentive," Frances said, and smiled. "In any case, you are wrong. I spend an extraordinary amount of time thinking about the Red Country."

"The Red Country?" Helen said. She laughed too. "It is a game — but I admit that games are wonderful to think about."

The Red Country was a game she and Frances had invented during their second year at Montclair, when, in the rowdiness given to girls of eleven, they had knocked over one of Mrs. Henley's sitting room vases during tea and were sent to scrub pots as punishment. Even when the kitchen staff had gone home for the evening, the two of them had been forced to remain, elbows deep in suds, their fingers growing blistered and numb from the rough bristles of the brush. Frances had remarked how like Cinderellas they were, and they had begun speaking of fairy tales, which led in a roundabout way to Helen saying I wish we could invent a fairy kingdom of our own, and Frances saying, Why can't we?
Oh, Helen had said, but that's for writers. My Pa, he writes fairy tales sometimes. For his sermons.

And Frances had tossed her lovely dark head and declared, We can do anything your stupid Pa can do.

They had never written any of their Red Country stories down, but they had spun them nonetheless; several during the early years, fewer now that they were older and had their time preoccupied by a greater onslaught of pursuits. The Red Country, Frances had decided, was a beautiful world in which everything was strange and there were no rules at all, no gods and no men, which had frightened Helen in the beginning, but Frances spoke of it with such sinful delight that she could not help but be seduced. In the Red Country everything was possible.

Frances described the heart of the Red Country as a giant chessboard, on which great games were played, and which each square was a door into a province.

The game is played, she had once said, but it is never won.

What shall happen if it is won? Helen had asked.

The end of the world, of course, Frances had replied, but we never have to worry about that.

I shall like for there to be a rabbit, Helen had decided. One time, my mother gave me a dreadful scolding for being late to church, because I had been chasing rabbits in the glen. Well, now, in the Red Country, surely it will be the rabbit's fault! This rabbit is always late.

I, for one, shall like the ability to grow larger or smaller by whim, Frances had said. I can hide if I do not want to be found, and I can be a fearful giant when I want to crush Catherine Walton under my feet. There is a potion that will make you grow smaller, and there will make you grow larger — large and fat! They had collapsed into giggles then.

Helen blinked. It was easy enough to recall their old stories. They had told them often, adding and changing them as they liked. Helen had long ago decided that the White Rabbit was to be her personal companion in the Red Country, until Frances' fourteenth birthday, when Helen had given her the White Rabbit as a gift. Now in the stories the White Rabbit was Frances' herald — that was, when he remembered to show up in a timely fashion.

"Today," said Frances, with her feet still in Helen's lap, "is my unbirthday. In the Red Country, we celebrate unbirthdays with unbirthday cake."

"What is an unbirthday?" Helen asked.

"Precisely what it sounds like," Frances said. "It is celebrated on any day that is not your birthday." She rolled her shoulders. "Today is your unbirthday too."

"Well then," Helen said lightly, "a very happy unbirthday to the both of us. How shall we spend it? Or what is left of it," she amended, for the sun had dropped well below the fields and they were sitting in what had rapidly become the damp dark. Frances seemed not to mind. Frances was in her element.

Frances reached into her skirts and pulled out a set of Mr. Julian's Finest, mermaid-backed with gilt and arcane symbols. "Cards?" she said.
"You are seventeen years old," Miss Travers said. "You have only a few fortnights before we have nothing more to teach you. What shall you do then?"

"I can't imagine I have many options," Helen said, sitting across from her German tutor in the small room with the painting of a restless sea. There was a stain on her sleeve from where the Worcestershire sauce had spilled from luncheon; she dabbed at it idly with her handkerchief. "My family has mismanaged their resources. I have always been prepared to live by my own means."

"You will teach then," Miss Travers said. She was an oddly shaped woman, with a figure that seemed large around her shoulders and then stick-like around her legs. When she walked, she bobbed like a clockwork toy; Helen loved her dearly.

"I hope so," Helen said. "Surely there will be at least one household in England who will hire me as their governess."

Miss Travers ran a finger over the top of her lip thoughtfully. "It may be so," she acknowledged. "However, do not raise your hopes, my dear. Governesses are as common as ants these days, and so the positions are difficult to find. Employers believe they can pay them more cheaply for it."

"I shall accept what I can find," Helen said. She cast her eyes at her German books and then back upwards again. "I am not ambitious."

"And that is a shame," Miss Travers said.

It was a shame, Helen privately agreed. If they truly inhabited a fairy kingdom such as the Red Country, there were a great many professions she might have set her mind to. If she had an even fancier education, if she had the connections, if she were a man — ah! But Frances was the one whose dreams were full of animals and monsters. Helen said, "Is there a chance that Mr. Montclair will hire me as a teacher? I should like to stay."

"There is a chance," Miss Travers said. She looked about both ways, at the slightly open door — they were not allowed to shut doors fully at the school, for it encouraged salaciousness. Miss Travers lowered her voice. "I would not recommend it, however."

Helen looked at her favourite teacher.

"There are many restrictions," Miss Travers continued. "The female teachers are not allowed to have visitors, we are not allowed to leave the grounds except on Sundays or to accompany our students — and Mr. Montclair the Younger, he is often presumptuous."

"In what way?" Helen asked, hushed. Mt. Montclair the Younger was the headmaster's son, a grown man who had attempted to make his fortunes in the Indies, but who had returned unsuccessful in his investments in order to teach geometry at his father's school, alongside his parents and his widowed aunt, Mrs. Henley. Being Head Girl, Helen had the occasional dealing with him. She found him self-important and condescending, though neither were unusual traits in the Montclair family.

"You need not ask me to illustrate," Miss Travers said dryly. "Oh, I daresay it is bearable! We are not Christians in Nero's lion den here. But there is bearable and then there is what Miss Helen Dunn should live for. I believe a girl of your talents is meant for better pastures, my dear. You learn so quickly!"

"You have too many hopes for me," Helen said.
"Was kann ich wissen? Was soll ich tun? Was darf ich hoffen?" Miss Travers said. "What can women of our position do, but hope?"

Frances’ heart was a red, red ruin.

The Montclair teachers said that she was troubled of mind, a girl of poisoned blood and stock, though of course they never said such things in polite company, for Frances Leviathan was the daughter of a viscount and some courtesies were still given to her — more in the beginning than now. It was rarely spoken of out loud, save by Catherine Walton who did not hold her tongue when it could be held and stroked by her admirers instead. However, the teachers were capable of dictating the atmosphere of the school in their subtle ways, and even as young first year girls they had all learned that Frances was not to be trusted nor taken into confidence.

She was sullen, and brooding, and overly quiet until irked, in which case her tongue was like an Egyptian flail, delivering a thousand lashes.

Helen was not quite certain how she and Frances had become such close friends, and indeed, in the eyes of everybody who observed them, it was an unlikely match. All she could recall was this: sitting with the other girls at the dining tables, watching Frances mull over her food alone, and feeling pity.

It is not her fault that her father killed her mother and then fled to the Continent, Helen had thought, and so, summoning her courage, she had taken her bowl and brought it beside Frances.

Frances had not spoken to her for another two weeks. She did not even deign to notice Helen, until one day when they were in line for the washing basin, and she had said coolly, You are standing on the hem of my dress.

Helen, aggrieved by this girl's poor humour, had said, It is an ugly dress.

To which Frances had replied, Yours is an ugly face. It was true, but Helen had felt pain at the accusation. It was particularly infelicitous when its source was someone as beautiful as Frances, with her small, delicate figure, and her curls, and her dark, fathomless eyes. She resembled nothing so much as an Italian princess.

Perhaps it was inevitable then. They had two choices from that moment onwards: be bitter rivals like Frances and Catherine Walton, which Helen had not particularly desired — she had a lasting fondness for her teeth. Or they could become uneasy friends, and Helen could spend the next five years at Montclair learning to understand the inconsistencies of Frances' moods, learning a language anew that was full of meaningful pauses and flippant responses.

She could translate the language flawlessly when, during etiquette class, Mrs. Henley sent her measuring stick slapping over Frances' knuckles. It made a thick sound of wood meeting bone, and then Frances was rearing backwards, her knuckles reddening with blood.

"Pay attention, you foolish girl!" Mrs. Henley cried, and Helen made herself look rather than give in to her temptation to simply glance away. It was not the first time Mrs. Henley had struck a girl during class, nor even the first time she had struck Frances. Most of the teachers were not given to such an enthusiastic method of discipline, but Mrs. Henley proclaimed it a sour but effective medicine.
Frances stopped cupping the knuckles of her right hand with the fingers of her left. She peeked at them and then looked upwards, stormy, into Mrs. Henley's irate expression.

"Did you hear me?" Mrs. Henley said slowly.

Frances did not speak.

Mrs. Henley grabbed her wrist and brought the measuring stick down again. Martha Corrick gasped, and Helen felt the awful pressure of her own teeth grinding down. There was another reddening blossom on Frances' knuckles now, but it still seemed like a war-torn decade before Frances lowered her eyes and murmured, "Yes, ma'am."

"It is hardly as if I enjoy this," Mrs. Henley pronounced. "You girls are like my own daughters, and for this reason I want to see you lot brought up into the world properly. Here, like little pampered rabbits, you may be as contrary as you wish." She lowered her measuring stick, colour high in her thin cheeks. "Not so out in the world, where your reputation will be lost in an instant. Do you understand?"

"We understand," Helen said quickly.

"Then we shall return to discussing the best methods of arranging a tea party table," Mrs. Henley said, "and we shall have no more rude gestures."

Had Frances made a rude gesture then? Helen had not seen it, but she could not manage to summon up any measure of astonishment either.

Frances did not make an appearance during dinner, and with a deep sigh, Miss Brodie noticed and sent Helen after her. It was what Helen desired to do, but one could not leave the dining hall without permission, much less if one were seated at the high table. With Miss Brodie's permission, Helen walked down the path and to the woods where Frances was once more resting beneath the trees, her arms tucked behind her head. Helen sat down beside her and took her hand, examining Frances' bruised knuckles under her own purview. "They will heal," she said. "The wounds are not deep."

"Of course they will heal," Frances said. She rolled over. "You have a bulge in your skirts. Have you brought food for me?"

"You can't simply expect that every time you run away from dinner, I will track you down and bring it to you," Helen said, but even as she spoke, she unwrapped the two warm buns.

Frances smiled with a corner of her heart-shaped mouth. "How good you are to me."

"Just eat it," Helen urged. Frances ripped open the buns with her fingernails, with no care for finesse or any of the table manners Mrs. Henley had instructed them in. "Is that how they eat in the Red Country?" Helen asked, vying for humorous spirits.

Frances said, "The way they eat in the Red Country would give Mrs. Henley vapours. The tea parties there have no arrangement. They are topsy turvy and upside down."

"A mad tea party," Helen said.

"Tea for lunatics," Frances agreed. Her smile this time was quick and heart-stopping, vanished almost as quickly as it had come. She rose to her feet, and Helen saw that she had no shoes on; they were lying some distance away on the grass, forgotten. "Tea for the madmen, tea for the madwomen, tea for you and me." She swiveled on her stockinged heels, her arms outstretched. She looked like a weathervane.
"What would tea for madmen taste like?" Helen wondered.

"What would it taste like?" Frances stopped, and her arms slackened to her sides. She looked thoughtful. "It would taste like... why, I imagine it would taste like everything you ever wanted."

"But that sounds lovely! Why is it mad then?"

"Because only a madman would think to imagine such a thing being within his grasp," Frances said.

"That is horrible," Helen replied.

Frances immediately fell to her knees and crawled the the distance between them. She raised a cool hand and pressed it to Helen's cheek; it did not explain why Helen felt so suddenly warm. A shiver ran through her, like a fox. "I'm sorry," Frances said. "Have I made you angry? I don't mean to say these things. If only for you, I would think of happy things always."

"You would not be true to yourself then," Helen said. "You would be a China doll pretending to be Frances. Oh, don't think you are not occasionally infuriating!" she added when she saw Frances' raised brows. "You are exceedingly infuriating, and I wish you would behave better in class. But I would not want you to be otherwise, for so great a price."

"What does that matter?" Frances asked, stroking Helen's hair.

"It matters to me," Helen said.

Spring came to Warwickshire in sheets of rain. Helen learned to measure out the lines of her embroidery work by the rhythm of the water as it beat against the glass panes of Montclair Manor, first harshly and then more gently, as the weather was tamed by the warmer air and by the first presence of flowers, growing out of the very soil that Frances was so fond of sprawling on decadently. In her German lessons, she began the long and arduous task of attempting to read Goethe in his original language. In history class, she was given leave to help Miss Dixon teach lessons to the younger girls, helping them remember the entire succession of the Kings of England. In etiquette class, she refined her manners with the more obscure points of address for members of all ranks of societies. In the fine arts, she produced a score of sketches of fruit and animals.

"You have a fine sense of mobility," Mrs. Ludd, their drawing teacher, remarked. "Look how alive this cat seems!"

"I am afraid it only looks alive because I spent all evening chasing it," Helen replied. "It is the cook's cat, and it is very feisty."

Mrs. Ludd moved to Frances. "Ah, but look at this! You have talent too!" Helen peered over to see Frances' sketchbook open to a drawing of the manor from its eastern view, and she saw that Mrs. Ludd was right. It was exceptionally well-done, almost to the obsessive detail of architectural schema.

Frances said, "There is still too much undefined space in this corner." She rubbed her thumb against it.
Spring then! Spring, with softer colours and the return of the birds from the south. Spring, with Miss Travers singing German opera for Helen's ears alone, giving her the gift of her former profession. Spring, with violets in the garden and onion soup in the dining hall. Spring, with Frances waking Helen in the middle of the night, not with a nudge nor a whisper, but with a quick, sharp jerk, shaking her shoulder with a force that made Helen nearly cry out in surprise.

"Come with me," Frances hissed, and her tone of presumptive authority tested the mettle of Helen's temper.

"There are those of us who appreciate a small God-given gift that we call sleep," she said irritably.

"Yes, yes, but not now," Frances said. She kept her voice low as to not wake the other girls — only last week had Catherine Walton caught the two of them sharing a bed at night, and she had made such mocking japes about it that Helen had felt a twinge of embarrassment, which for another girl might have been almost hysterical with shame. Frances bent down and searched through Helen's chest of meagre belongings, finding her wrap and throwing it at her. "There is something in the woods. You need to see!"

"What would you know of the woods in the middle of the night? Helen said, but then she stopped. "You are telling me that you honestly leave the manor... at this hour... how?"

"This is not Buckingham Palace," Frances said. "A minor morsel of cleverness is more than enough. Are you dressed yet?"

"This is nonsense," Helen said.

Frances took her hand and clasped it tightly. "Will you come, though? Will you do me this one favour?"

"If we are caught—"

"Only Mr. Montclair the Younger patrols the halls at night, and I know his pattern. We will not be caught," said Frances. There was a devilish fever in her eyes that made them shine brightly. Helen was afraid, and then she was resigned.

"We must be quick about it," she said, and she followed Frances out of the dormitory and down the hall, through a back staircase that she had not even known existed — it must have been a servants' passage. The staircase led them through the cellar and then out a door. Stepping into the night, Helen saw moonlight play over her hastily assembled shoes in sharp lines, like crochet needles. She shivered and tightened her wrap, ready to speak once more, to perhaps change her mind — but Frances was already running across the grass lawn towards the woods, towards the copse of trees, which seemed much more menacing in the dark then they did during the day, though that was true of most things, foliage included.

Instead of stopping by the edge of the woods and making herself comfortable in her favourite hiding spot, Frances went straight on into the wedge of trees. Helen called out after her. "Wait!" she said, her own steps growing more rapid in response. "Frances, wait!"

The woods marked the edge of the school property. She had never been in them, nor had she ever possessed the desire to; the only time she left school was to go to town or to take the coach to her parents, but those journeys made use of the main road. They did not involve running blindly into the woods, as Helen did now, Frances' name dissolving like pepper on her tongue, spiced with worry. The moonlight became scarcer; she was no longer in an open field. There were trees, and her shoes sank deep into puddles of rainwater, slipping on land where it was soft and wet from storms.
She went into the woods —
— and then she stopped, sharply, her voice a scraping knife against her throat. "What is this?" she said quietly.

Frances turned around. "I am glad you caught up to me. I was beginning to wonder."

"Frances, what is this?"

They must have still been in the woods, and yet what Helen saw did not resemble a forest at all, not even a glade. It was too large, for one. Helen had glimpsed the woods from all of its sides while leaving and entering Montclair, and she knew the glen she saw before her could have fit into the woods twice over. It was a valley to impress kings, dipping low with bushes and rolling hills — and for another matter, Helen thought, it was day. She could clearly see the sun, but had it not been night merely a few moments ago? She took a step backwards. "I must be going mad," she said aloud.

It must have been madness. What other reason was there? For not only was there the vastness of the glen, or the appearance of the sun, but she saw that the valley was not green as it should be, not the pale anemic green of her own memories, or the more vivid green she had once seen crossing the border from Northumberland into Scotland. The grass here was red and white — they grew in alternating squares, so that the entire land spread at her feet resembled a giant chequered board, from which grew tall trees and through which ran a twisting Medusa's nest of streams.

"Do you not recognize it?" Frances asked eagerly. "I ran for you as soon as I saw it."

"What is this?" Helen demanded.

"Why, it is our wonderland!" Frances said. "It is the Red Country itself."

"Impossible," was Helen's succinct response. This was, she decided, a very elaborate and well-crafted dream. Possibly Frances had poisoned her — Frances' few attempts at making tea had had no less an effect in the past. Most likely, Helen thought, they were in class right now, and Frances was being berated for putting Helen to sleep with the idleness of their conversation.

With that thought in mind, safely held inside the comforting quarters of her own head, Helen took a deep breath.

Well, it was not so bad a dream. Perhaps she should stay a while.

The air was crisp and clean, with a sweet quality to it that Helen associated with very high places. Like mountain air, she thought, though she could not know for sure, having only read about mountain air in books. The trees were taller than the Warwickshire trees — she should have noticed that immediately as well. They were taller and they were darker, and as she walked closer to them for inspection, she saw that they bore fruits the colour of rubies, and as large as swollen tumours.

"There are signs," Frances said in tones of utter delight. She pointed at the wooden tags hanging off some of the trees. Helen continued walking and saw that there was only one tag per coloured square, and engraved on them were names such as The Maze in the Sea, The Caterpillar's Cocoon, The Broken Wall, and one that simply read Despair.

"It is the Red Country," Helen said. "These are straight from our stories."

"Yes," Frances said, "but some of them are new as well. This one, for example." She grabbed a
tag from a tree and showed it to Helen. "The Cottage on the Hill. I don't remember ever telling a story about a cottage on a hill." She tilted her head at Helen, anticipatory. "Shall we go see it?"

"I suppose there is no reason not to," Helen said, and Frances gave the tag two hard yanks.

When Helen next blinked, she saw that they had left the chessboard valley behind entirely. Now the sky was grey and they were standing atop a rocky cliff. If she looked down, she could behold the sea beating against the impassive rock face; if she stretched her gaze even further, in the direction she assumed was west, she could see an outcrop of stone rising from the sea in nonsensical patterns. The maze, she thought, and it made sense, for the chessboard square labeled The Maze in the Sea had been directly adjacent to the square labeled The Cottage on the Hill. Then Helen looked forward, at the cottage, which stood alone, with slippery tiles like eels.

"The door is open," Frances observed.

The door was open, and they could not hear anyone inside. Nor did anybody come when they knocked. Helen's instinct was to leave, but Frances jumped through the threshold and then stepped quite neatly inside. "Don't lecture me about propriety," she said. "We created this place. Does it not, in effect, belong to us?"

"You may be right," Helen said, "but even so, we should be cautious. We did not make this particular cottage, so who knows what might be waiting here?"

Quick as one of Mrs. Henley's slaps, Frances whipped around and leaped at Helen, screaming at her top of her lungs.

"Ahhhhhh!" Helen cried, recoiling.

"You mean something like that?" Frances inquired.

"You..." Helen struggled for breath. "Damn you," she finally said, and Frances' laughter was as bright as she had ever heard it.

"I didn't know you were even familiar with those sorts of words!" Frances declared. "I should feel awful for corrupting you and lending you French novels, but I cannot muster the appropriate shame." She twirled around, her skirts flying about her ankles. She went wandering deeper into the cottage. Helen gritted her teeth and followed her, her duty as always to keep Frances out of trouble because Frances did not have the sense to know better.

There was no occupant inside the cottage, and Helen felt a coldness settle into her bones as she gazed around, for there had once been an occupant, she suspected — and then some strange matter had occurred. The house was a mess inside, crockery shattered on the floor, the curtains torn to shreds, furniture overturned. There were scratches on the wall, long and deep.

A dining table had been set for three, teetering precariously with one leg splintered. There were shattered cups, on which were painted fragmented ships in eggshell blue, and pieces of smeared butter toast leaving a crumb trail for the ants. Frances picked a piece up. "Still warm," she said.

"What happened here?" Helen asked.

"Violence," Frances said. "I am sure of it. I happen to be an expert on the subject, you see." She set down the toast and examined the crumbs on her fingers with scientific devotion.

"Do you think someone died?"

Frances stared at her. Then she laughed again, throwing her head back. "How morbid you are!"
she said. She stepped forward and hooked their arms together. "Well, there is not much else to see here. Shall we find another tree with another tag, and be adventurers like Dr. Livingstone?"

"I can't say I like this place," Helen said as Frances led her gamely away.

"You need not like it," Frances replied. "You talk of going to London often enough, and it is hardly as if you like London."

"I have never been to London before," Helen said.

"And you have never been to the Red Country either," Frances said. "I assure you, it is probably ten times more interesting, and there are fewer pigeons besides, which I always count the most attractive of all the qualities."

It was a dream, Helen reminded herself.

"It is not a dream," Frances said. She gripped Helen by the wrists when they left the woods and stepped back onto Montclair land. It remained night-time, and when Helen crept past the grandfather clock that stood outside the classrooms, she saw that it had been scarce more than two hours since she had first followed Frances on their makeshift adventure.

"You must remember this. It is not a dream," Frances repeated. She pressed her fingernails into the soft skin beside Helen's wrist bones, merciless. "If you say it is a dream, I shall never forgive you."

"But what else could it be?" Helen asked reasonably. "This is not Shakespeare. There are no Pucks or Tatianas in truth."

"And what, pray tell, is truth?" Frances sneered.

Truth, Helen thought, was the most beautifully complex organism in the world. Truth was Newton and the laws of physics, distilled into rational numbers. Truth was when she put hot water on the stove, added tea leaves, and made tea as a result. Truth was that too much sunlight could make fair skin burn, and truth was that Mrs. Henley bullied her girls because that was what Mr. Henley, when he was still alive, used to do to her.

"The truth," Helen said, whispering as they were in a dark corner in front of their dormitory, "is that one cannot simply step through a thicket of trees and end up in another world."

"The truth," Frances said, "is that you just did."

Helen closed her eyes. By chance or by calculation, she had leaned her shoulders against the wall in defiance of her ladylike education, and Frances had chosen to lean forward, so that she was very nearly pressing Helen to the wall. Frances' elbow rested by Helen's head, and Frances' mouth was ruthlessly red in the dark; nothing should be allowed to be that red, Helen thought. "How did you come to discover that part of the woods anyway?" she asked.

"I was chasing a rabbit," said Frances.

"Was he very late?"
"I rather think that we were," Frances said. "Do you not understand the significance of this? We told stories about the Red Country, and it exists. Either it already existed and we simply received the knowledge of it, without our knowing. Or it exists because we told stories about it." She bit her lip, white teeth against red mouth. "Perhaps we are gods."

"I shall settle for being mere mortal, thank you very much," Helen said. "It would alarm my mother and father less." She shook free from Frances' looming presence and headed into their dormitory, where she removed her shoes and wrap silently in the dark and slid back under her bedcovers. For a moment, it seemed as if Frances would follow her and argue the point further. However, Frances shook her head like a hound, two quick jerks to each side to dislodge errant thoughts, and granted her some peace instead.

But Helen did not sleep. She lay awake listening to the other girls' breathing, to the sawing cadence of Dolores Kember's snores. Then there was a sound against the windowpane, a shadow of a tree branch brushing the glass. The sound grew steadier; it was raining.

"One more time," Helen said. "We shall see if the Red Country appears today, though I think it will not."

"You are the daughter of a vicar," Frances said. "Where is your faith?" She smiled when Helen cast her a briny look, and then softened the smile to show that she meant no ill will. "One more time then," she said, and Helen knew it for a lie. If the Red Country did appear in the woods again, Frances would go to it a second time, and a third, as many times as the divine powers would allow it.

_If there was a bomb, you would run towards it, not away_, Helen thought, and it unsettled her, what it meant about her dearest friend.

If the Red Country should turn out to be a country of stone and water, and not merely dream-wisp, then it was clear that Helen would need to accompany Frances into it, for she could only imagine what dangers Frances would get to otherwise. Frances could not memorize a Donne poem or conjugate a French verb even if all her teachers should yell at her for it, but she had an animal cunning, as evidenced by her ability to sneak about the manor and pilfer other girls' jewelry without being noticed — yet that animal cunning did not extend to any sense of self-preservation.

_She is like a child_, Helen thought, washed up with hopeless affection. _She is the girl who stood still in the fire, and has never grown up._

The broken teacups and the dry pieces of toast remained in the cottage when they returned. The tea in the one good cup was a marshy mess; a dragonfly landed on the rim and then took off. Frances puttered about the cottage, opening all of the windows to release some of the musty air, her skirts trailing over the pieces of smashed furniture as she walked.

"There is cake in the pantry," Frances observed, poking her nose inside the cupboards.

"There is mysterious cake in a mysterious pantry in a mysterious world," Helen said. "I would not advise you to think about it further."

"Oh, but are you not hungry?" Frances said.

"We have just taken luncheon at school."
"Yes, and the eggs were burnt, and the bread was days old," Frances replied. "Ever since the old cook left, the food has been dreadful. At least for those of us who do not enjoy the particular privilege of dining at the headmaster's table." She reached into the pantry and lifted out a tray of daisy-coloured sponge cake. "Look, someone has already taken a bite."

*And now the cottage is in shambles, like a horde of savannah beasts went rampaging through,* Helen thought. She moved to snatch the cake from Frances, but the tray was heavier than it appeared, and in the process it teetered, and then fell to the floor.

"Now we must try a piece," Frances said airily, "or else the gods of desserts shall be offended." She knelt and, using her fingers, scooped a dab of the sponge cake, which she then transferred to one of the remaining good plates on the table. Helen watched her warily, growing more alarmed when she saw that Frances was not jesting. Frances found a fork, and then the fork found the battered piece of cake, and the piece of cake found her mouth.

"Are you out of your mind!" Helen said.

"It is delicious!" Frances said. "It is also terrible for my figure, but my figure can go stuff it, don't you think?" She swallowed. "It tastes like sunshine. Try some."

Helen folded her arms across her chest. "And die of diphtheria? I would rather not."

"Don't be silly—" Frances began, to which Helen had a ready retort. She lacked the opportunity to deploy it, however, because right then and before her eyes, Frances vanished.

Helen's jaw snapped shut like a monkey cage.

"Oh!" she could hear Frances exclaim. "Oh! Oh! I can't see my hand anymore. Helen! I do believe I am invisible!"

"Where are you?" Helen asked, turning about this way and that.

"Over here!" Frances said, but Helen could not see her. "I'm waving at you! Can you really not see me?"

"Not at all," Helen said. There was a rustle against her skin, a slight breeze as if someone had walked straight past her. Silence followed it for a moment, but the silence was ruined by one of the forks on the table rising in mid-air and then flying to the wall. "Is that your doing? Helen called. "Or should I have cause to fear ghosts as well?"

"It is me," Frances said. A teacup went sailing through the air, and then smashed to the floor. "I must say, this is the best cake I have ever had!"

"It is the most *destructive* cake you have ever had, and that counts the time Agatha Gilbert threw her portion at your face," Helen said, her wits keeping her head steady. Otherwise it would be so easy to feel light-headed about this whole matter. Invisible girls and flying cutlery — this was not the world she was used to. She watched Frances tear about the cottage some more, lifting trinkets and marveling at her own altered state. Helen began to fret; what if the effects of the cake did not wear off?

They did, eventually, and Frances reappeared before her with a smile of devilish delight.

"You look happy," Helen said. She had meant to say otherwise. She had meant for her speech to be less clumsy, or manifestly pedestrian. But that was what she was, Helen thought privately. She was pedestrian. Frances was the one who was brave and exceptional, even in an upside-world
world.

"Ah, is that what this is?" Frances mused. She cocked her head and pondered the matter. The sunlight from the open windows streamed into the room like liquor. "Yes," she said. "Yes, you may be right."

Every third week, on a Sunday, the Montclair girls went to town. The older girls went first, to attend church service; then they returned to the school to fetch the groups of younger girls, shepherding them through Stratford upon Avon, and through the shops and the marketplace where they completed their minor errands. Then they picnicked on the banks of the river. The teachers came along as well, those that could be spared on a Sunday afternoon, and oftentimes Mr. Montclair the Younger oversaw the entire enterprise, walking the distance with his gaze set forward and a shine high on his brow.

It was the birthplace of Shakespeare, and yet it seemed not so stately when the girls descended, talking and laughing and sometimes running, competing against each other both in friendliness and rivalry. They were meant to walk in rows, two girls shoulder-to-shoulder, but it rarely worked out as such, and most of the time Helen found herself shouting admonishments and trying to keep the girls from storming any given establishment all at the same time.

It was often difficult, with her duties as chaperone, to find the time to complete her own errands in town, which was why she tended to ask Frances to complete them for her. Mrs. Henley did not trust Frances to be an authority over anybody, and so Frances was typically exempt from overseeing the younger schoolgirls. She was able, then, to slip off on her own, reappearing only when it was time for everybody to return to the school.

Today, it was not possible for Frances to do that for her. Helen needed a visit to the cobbler, to repair a broken sole on her left shoe. However, she only had the one pair, and she could hardly remove them and hand them over to Frances, spending the rest of the day wandering barefoot.

"Frances," she said slowly, catching Frances' eye from where it was wandering towards a dapper young man who smiled at her, effortlessly charmed by Frances' loveliness. Frances frowned.

"Hmm?" she said.

"Can you watch these girls for a while?" Helen said. Mrs. Henley would not approve, but Mrs. Henley was up at the school with a headache. "I will not be long."

Frances nodded.

"Do not start a fire," Helen instructed. "Do not feed them. Do not taunt them. Above all, do not lose them."

"I will apply myself devotedly to the task," Frances said sardonically, and Helen supposed that was as much as she would ever receive. She excused herself from the group and headed down the opposite street to the cobbler's. It was a fine-weather day, so perhaps she strolled a bit more sedately than she should have, but it was hardly as if Frances would cause a ruckus. There were the other girls nearby, anyway, and Dolores Kember was a sensible sort. Helen could depend on her to rein any bad behaviour in if necessary.

There was a bookseller with a cart on the way to the cobbler's, and Helen stopped briefly to
examine his cheaply printed wares. No fine volumes, these; his Shakespeare folios were newsprint quality. Even so, she could not afford them, not unless she wished to walk on broken shoes. She drew away from the cart, reluctantly.

The repair to her shoes was simple, and it was not long before Helen was walking briskly back to the main square, where the girls were gathering in preparation for their riverside luncheon. Frances had done well; Helen quickly counted the heads of her little group. There were seven when she had left, and there were seven when she returned. Helen paused when she saw Mr. Montclair the Younger watching them, fearing a rebuke for leaving her girls behind, even if she had secured alternate arrangements. He looked straight at them with heavy eyelids and did not blink.

But it was not Helen he was staring at.

Miss Travers ambled through the Montclair gathering. "Have you seen Miss Walton by any chance?" she asked them. "Her girls are unattended, and she appears to be missing."

"I will go look for her," Helen promised. "I know her habits. Take the girls to the river — we will join you later."

Miss Travers gave her assent. Helen set off towards the dressmaker at the end of Sheep Street, but Catherine Walton was not there. Then she visited the hatter next door, but Catherine was not there either. Now this is curious, Helen thought to herself, for these were Catherine's regular haunts during their town visits. Helen notice a waving motion in the corner of her eye, and she turned in time to see the approach of Miss Anderson and Miss Carson, two spinsters who were friends of Miss Travers. Miss Anderson was tall and gaunt, and Miss Carson short and fat; they both wore expressions of vague amusement like maquillage.

"Helen Dunn," Miss Carson said. "How now?"

"I am searching for Miss Catherine Walton," Helen said politely. "Have you seen her?"

"We did," Miss Anderson responded, and pointed down the street with an idle gloved hand. "She was heading in that direction. Good hunting."

"Thank you and good day! I would stop to chat, but I am afraid I shouldn't tarry," Helen said, hurrying along the street with a backwards wave. The street Miss Anderson indicated was not a street Helen knew overly well, containing a tavern, a brewery, and the Golden Rooster Inn, none of which were regular stops on the Montclair routine.

She spied Catherine at last, stepping out of the inn. When Catherine saw Helen, her face went slack and white, and then it turned stiff, as if she were nothing more than a figure in an oil painting. "I hope I didn't give you too much trouble," she said. "My father asked me to deliver a message to one of his old Oxford friends, who is visiting town this week."

Does delivering a message to your father's friend require your hair to be dishevelled? Helen wondered. It was a minuscule change, for Catherine was too well-bred to be sloppy, but Helen had known her for years. She knew what her hair looked like when it was properly attended to, as it had been this morning, and what it looked like when she dressed hurriedly without the aid of a mirror.

"Well, we should not keep the others waiting," she said.

Catherine's smile was a queer, slanted thing. "No, of course not," she replied.
There were walls in the cottage on the hill, and Frances could walk through all of them.

The cottage bore blatant signs of fairy magic, for even though they saw no occupants, not even the whisper of a voice, the cupboards refilled every time they returned, offering new sweets and goods that Frances sampled without hesitation. Helen resisted the urge for many weeks, even as Frances cajoled her with dripping words, saying that the food had not harmed her yet, so why should a single taste be so terrible for Helen?

After some time, even Helen's resolve turned from rock to loam, and she tasted a piece of creme tart that made her tongue feel like gossamer, and had her floating to the ceiling, as buoyant as a hot air balloon.

Frances, who had already claimed dominion of the ceiling, took her hands. They floated in circles together, until Helen was breathless.

There were two floors to the cottage, and a small attic tucked away, accessible by a staircase that came down when one pulled on a rope. There were two bedrooms, one with a large bed and one with a small bed. In the beginning, neither Helen nor Frances left the first floor with the kitchen and the parlour, for that was where their entertainment lay, and there were many curiosities to be found there: the cake, but also the music box that played any song they could ask of it, and landscape paintings that changed with the weather.

When it did occur to them to venture upstairs, Helen found the smaller bedroom crowded with books.

So many of them! More books than her father had owned. More books than Mr. Montclair the Elder owned as well — the teetering stacks of books started in the bedroom but trailed out of it, like a hungry serpent, so that Helen was practically walking on covers as she stepped gingerly across the second story floorboards, picking up titles as she went. There was Marcus Aurelius here, and all the Greek and Roman writers — classics that her older brother Henry studied on his way to becoming a clergyman, but which Montclair never taught her. Helen spend the entirety of a day inside the Red Country, sitting in a corner quietly reading St. Augustine. Then the next day, she read Aphra Behn. Then she read her fill of Shakespeare, before moving on to Boswell's account of Samuel Johnson.

Frances laughed at her merrily. "I knew it was only a matter of finding your weakness!" she said. "Now you too are loathe to return to school."

"I am not at all," Helen insisted, but her protest was weak — even she could hear as much. She tried to carry some of the books under her arm when they departed the Red Country, but they always crumbled the moment she crossed out of the woods, leaving ash and ink stains on her hands where the books used to be.

A thought struck her that she could use the provenance of the books to discover who the erstwhile owner of the cottage might be. So Helen scoured the volumes, looking for bookplates and crests of cadency. She found one clue in Anthony Hammond's *New Miscellany of Original Poems, Translations and Imitations, by the most Eminent Hands*. It was written on the endpapers, in rich black ink:

*Ex libris H. Dunn.*
She closed the book quickly.

"This place is very strange," she told Frances uneasily. "It knows us."

The next day, they found the White Rabbit.

"Run," Frances said, and Helen's entire body went immobile. They were sitting on the steps of the cottage, eating fruit with melted sugar, when Frances stood up without warning and was racing across the cliff. The abruptness of her movement was shocking, and it took longer than it should have for Helen to galvanize herself and follow Frances, running to the far edge of the cliff where the rock married the cold sea. The sky above them was stretched as tightly as cheesecloth, and Helen found Frances holding onto a bundle of white fur.

"A rabbit," Helen panted.

Frances was holding him aloft by his ears, but the rabbit did not struggle. He looked up at both girls with his black pebble eyes, and his nose twitched.

"Dear stars! The Caterpillar was right!" he squeaked.

"The rabbit talks," Helen said flatly.

"Of course he talks," said Frances. "It is the least he can do. Did you expect him to sing an opera instead?" She released her fist, and the White Rabbit went thump, falling to the rock and the dry white grass. Helen thought he might dash away then — but he did not.

"The Caterpillar!" he said in tones of lavish excitement. "The Caterpillar! His omens! Oh, we did not know if we were to believe him, but he was right, he was right!" The White Rabbit darted forward and sniffed at Helen's ankles, and then he dashed to Frances' ankles and sniffed them as well. His tail began to froth like cream.

In their stories, the Caterpillar was the wisest creature in the Red Country, a soothsayer of great renown and fickle appetite. So Helen chose her words judiciously, watching the White Rabbit run himself into frenzied circles. "What does the Caterpillar say?" she asked.

"The two queens! The two queens! He said you would come. The queen of the air and the queen of the blood. The queen who wears roses, and the queen who devours them!"

"If there is a queen, it should be Frances alone, not me," Helen said. "The Red Country was her idea, and red is her calling card, not mine."

"Two queens! He said two queens!" the White Rabbit insisted. "The queen of the flame and the queen of the sea! The queen of the sword and the queen of the looking-glass! The queen who sleeps and the queen who wakes!"

"As flattered as we are by your suggestion, the Red Country needs no queen," Frances spoke. "It is wild land, savage and ungovernable. Why do you think we thrill in it so? If there were queens, it would be scarce better than England."

"But there needs must be queens," the White Rabbit said.

"Why?" Frances pressed.

"Why? You ask why?" the White Rabbit said indignantly. "You come to Wonderland and you do not even know what queens are good for? Let me tell you, my ladies, there is one true task a queen is good for: to slay the Jabberwock!"
By special permission Helen returned to town, even though it was not the third Sunday of the month. She had a letter in hand, meticulously sealed into its plain tan envelope, and she meant for her errand to be quick. She knew it would be otherwise when, at the juncture where the road leading away from the manor broadened into the road leading towards town, Frances appeared, stepping out of the woods with a graceful swing.

"You are meant to be in history class," Helen said.

"What use is it now?" Frances said. "We are almost graduated. If I have not learned in the six years I have been at school, I will hardly suffer a transformation and learn it in these last few months."

"Graduation," Helen said, her fingers smoothing over the edges of her letter. "Yes, we should all start thinking about it."

Frances cocked her head. "What is that?"

"A letter I am sending to the newspapers, advertising my services as a governess."

"You are already beginning to search?" Frances asked. "And what if a response should come, asking for you within a fortnight? Would you leave Montclair early then?"

"I imagine so," Helen said. She caught Frances' unhappy look. "I would not want to," she added. "It would not be my preference, and I am yet to finish all of Miss Travers' lessons. But surely you understand. I am not like you. I don't have funds waiting for me at home. I must work to eat."

"How dreary and boring," Frances said.

"You would not understand," Helen said sharply.

"No, because my lot is to smile prettily at a wealthy stranger and lure him into matrimony," Frances said. "Also, somehow I must compel him to ignore my bloody history, lest he think that madness runs through my blood and I will wake up one morning after the wedding and butcher him in bed." She laughed.

Helen resumed walking towards town. Frances followed her. "You should introduce him to your older sister then," Helen said. She had met Miss Beatrice Leviathan once, when Miss Beatrice had come to Montclair to pay a visit to her younger sister. "She is charming and well-mannered. He will not wonder about madness then."

"I am afraid Beatrice is otherwise occupied," Frances said.

"Is that so?" Helen asked curiously. "I recall she used to send you letters, and they seemed very sweet. Now that it comes to mind, you have not received a letter from her in a while. Is she unwell?"

Frances kicked at the dirt with her shoes. "She still writes."

"Yet there are no letters," Helen said.

"I believe that Mrs. Henley and Mr. Montclair the Younger hide them," Frances said. "Or at least
"Y-your sister," Helen said, caught in a rare moment of stammer.

"She is very beautiful," Frances said, "and despite what you think about us, very poor." She shrugged. "Our family's money is tied with my father, and my father is traipsing about somewhere on the Continent, where we are entirely out of his mind, save for the small trust his solicitors have set aside for our schooling. Schooling is easy; it is when we grow up that they don't know what to do with us, so they do nothing."

"I did not know," Helen said softly.

"As I said, Beatrice is very beautiful," Frances replied dully. "She is rather fortunate in that sense. She can afford to be choosy, and from what I have heard in gossip, she has chosen well. He is mild and stupid."

Helen lifted a hand and touched her own face, her own scar.

"Don't feel inferior," Frances said.

"I did not mean to—"

"I like your scar," Frances said. "It lends you a strength of character that neither my sister nor I possess. And you would be a terrible courtesan anyway."

"I should hope so!" Helen said.

"Beauty has its own currency," Frances said as if she had not heard her, "but it is not a shield. It will not save me when the soldiers break through the walls. My mother was extraordinarily beautiful. My father wept when he first saw her in Florence. Wept, he claimed! Yet it meant little enough when he stabbed her with a letter opener sixteen times in the study."

Helen paled and reached for Frances' hand. Frances allowed it, but her hand was limp and unresponsive. She stared straight ahead, at the sky, at the West Midland fields, at the Stratford rooftops appearing before their purview like a flock of roosting birds. "You were there?" Helen asked. "I did not know either."

"I hid under the desk," Frances said. "I should have run and called for help, but I was too afraid." She furrowed her brow. Then she laughed brightly, terribly. "A letter opener! Such a small way to die!"

The most curious confluence of many small matters, Helen thought — and that created a world. There were a number of answers one could give to the unasked question, and from her father she had heard most of them. God was the sole Creator, and yet Helen had always wanted to ask: Did God create Hell then? Did God create Gehenna? Did God create charnel houses? Now she wondered: Did God create the Red Country? for she had begun to accept that it was not a dream. Else she dreamed of the same world every night, and her dreams were shared with Frances. It was not impossible, she finally decided, but it was exceedingly unlikely.
Helen wondered about the nature of acceptance then, that a fairy land in the middle of the woods had become the most believable explanation.

They snuck away to the Red Country whenever they could. Like first year girls stealing pieces of bread from the kitchen to fill their growing stomachs, Helen and Frances crept to the woods during every possible lull in their daily schedule. That time passed differently in the Red Country was to their benefit — Red Country time was elongated and stretched, like ribbons, while their time at Montclair seemed long, but only in comparison to the more visceral joys to be found in their private kingdom.

Two days after they met the White Rabbit — two days in Montclair time, and Helen did not know how many days in Red Country — they packed a picnic basket. Helen filled it with cheese and fresh apples, and Frances retreated to the cottage's cellar, returning with bottles of cordial and wine. Helen had tasted wine only once before, and when she informed Frances of this, Frances' smile was brilliant.

"We need to get you good and tipsy one day," she said, while Helen made a private vow to avoid just that. The Red Country had surprises enough that at least one of them needed to keep their wits.

They left Cottage on the Hill for their picnic, traveling back to the chessboard valley. As they walked amongst the trees, Helen glanced over her shoulder. "The White Rabbit is following us," she said quietly.

"Let him follow," Frances said. "He thinks we are queens? Let him be our royal court."

"I am not certain it is prudent to encourage him," Helen said. "Not if he and the other denizens of this country expect us to slay the Jabberwock."

"You don't feel like taking a jolly 'ol crack at Jabberwock slaying?" Frances teased. "I hear it is good sport, healthful for the lungs."

"I know you are only trying to make me laugh, but what the White Rabbit said made me nervous," Helen admitted. "I remember how many times you have dreamed of the Jabberwock, and that was even before we knew it was real."

"Have you ever dreamed of it?" Frances asked.

"I don't dream," said Helen.

Frances stopped in astonishment. "What, never?"

"Sometimes I feel as if I did have a dream, but I never remember properly when I wake," Helen said. She found a tree whose wooden tag read The Promenade. "Ah, this seems like a promising spot for a picnic!"

"Surely, when you say never, you are exaggerating. You mean to say rarely, or some such," Frances said, giving the tag only a cursory glance.

"No, I mean never," Helen said. Frances stared at her. Helen fidgeted, uncomfortable with the intensity of her friend's scrutiny. "Dreams are rather fanciful, and you may have noticed. I am not a fanciful person." She gestured at the tag. "Does the Promenade sound agreeable to you?"

"Yes, fine," Frances said, distracted. Helen tugged at the tag, so off they went.
The Promenade was a wide limestone path circling a turquoise lake. Like many other portions of the Red Country they had ventured into, the Promenade had a look of disrepair, its once fine Italian fountains now cracked and covered in strangling weeds and ivy. There was no one else present, which did not match Helen's expectations. It was one thing for a cottage on top of a remote hill to be isolated, and entirely another matter for a promenade to be empty. Even the White Rabbit had found the cottage, eventually. But the wind over the Promenade was mournful, a sibilant dirge for lost beauty.

Frances was watching her. "We could go, if this place does not suit you," she offered.

Helen shook her head. "No use in wasting a trip," she said. "Besides, look at the colour of the pond. Have you ever seen such a shade?" She walked over with the picnic basket hanging off her arm. She peered over the miniature stone enclosure that separated the walkway from the water. The water was almost too blue to look at.

They ate their luncheon by the water. Helen spread a gingham blanket over the limestone tiles, and Frances uncorked a bottle of wine. She poured two cups, and then she produced a small knife and cut the oranges into two halves, handing one half to Helen. The acidic juice dribbled down her fingers. She licked it away with her pink tongue.

"There is something about the Red Country, now that I have seen it," Helen said when she finished her portion of the orange. "A particular quality that reminds me of Hades, with how quiet it is all, and how alone we seem to be."

"I see your point," Frances said, "but if it is Hades, I like to think it is the Elysian Fields."

"Hmm," Helen said thoughtfully.

After they had finished their picnic, and Frances was buoyant with three cups of wine, she rose to her feet and said, "There is more to the promenade. See how it dips into that valley. Shall we have a look?"

"We might as well," Helen agreed, and began to pack up the basket. Frances waited impatiently and was already two steps ahead when Helen was finished. "Slow down!" Helen laughed, but Frances flapped her arms in a comical fashion and waggled her hips.

"I'll slow down if you can catch me!" she shouted.

Helen chased after her. She had the longer legs, but Frances was light and clever. They ran towards the valley hooting loudly, Frances cajoling Helen to run faster, to apply herself harder. Or are you a wilting flower, are you Catherine Walton, Frances shrieked, and when Helen was close enough, she threw herself whole-body at Frances, tackling her to the grass, where they wrestled and rolled down the sloping hill to the bottom of the valley.

They landed in a jumble, with Helen on top, her elbow digging into Frances' ribs. "Ugh," Frances said, and Helen grinned at her recklessly, relishing the warm flush of Frances' bare thigh pressing against hers from where their skirts had rucked up.

"You are my prisoner now," Helen said.

"So I am," Frances said huskily. "And what are your terms?"

"I — " Helen looked upwards and then stopped. "What are those?" she asked, her voice falling lower. Frances craned her neck to see what Helen meant, and then she scrambled out of Helen's hold to take a better look. There were two obelisks jutting out from the heart of the valley; they had not seen them from the promenade, which indicated how deceptively deep the valley ran.
obelisks were made of a dark, hefty stone, and in each of them was carved a giant boyish face, eyes half-lidded, mouth slightly open in an expression of surprised horror. And in both obelisks there was a vicious crack that split the stem nearly in two.

"Tweedledee and Tweedledum," said the White Rabbit, who had caught up to them unawares. "They were once the guardians of Wonderland."

"Then the Jabberwock came," Frances said.

"Then the Jabberwock came," the White Rabbit confirmed. "Oh, do you not see now what straits we are in? Do you not see how desperate we are?" His voice contained abject misery, and Helen felt sympathetically towards him. She reached and scratched the fur behind his ears.

"If the Jabberwock came, then that means he was not an original inhabitant," she said, comforting him. "Where did he come from?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" the White Rabbit wailed. "Caterpillar may know, but Caterpillar is gone! Missing for years! Poof, gone like smoke!" He buried his face against Helen's legs. "I cannot find him, but you might! My queens!"

"We are not messiahs," Frances said.

"I do recall earlier you said we might be gods," Helen said wryly.

But Frances grabbed the small knife she had tucked away in her skirt, the one she had used to cut the orange. She brought it over her palm, and Helen cried out — but Frances sliced her own skin open fearlessly, squeezing out a small stream of blood. "Look," she said, shoving her palm at the White Rabbit, who trembled. "We bleed. We feel pain. We have strange obsessions and unexplained follies. We say silly things that we later regret. We are human, and of all the creatures, we are least suited to have power over anything."

"Yet you want to," the White Rabbit said. "I see it in you! You are afraid."

Frances recoiled.

"Caterpillar said! Caterpillar said: no glory for you in other life! No power! No inheritance! But here, everything!" The White Rabbit shook. "Slay the Jabberwock! That is the only price!"

"The only price," Frances said.

"I think we should leave," Helen said. She gently pried the White Rabbit from her leg and set him aside. "Come, Frances, let us return to the cottage."

"What do you have but this?" the White Rabbit cried, unhearing. "Tell me, my lady! What will you do if not slay the Jabberwock? Eat, drink, be useless?"

Frances flinched.

"Hide then!" he said. "Hide and forget us! Watch us be eaten, one by one! Do nothing!"

"WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW?" Frances shouted. The sound of her voice was deafening in the valley, and as hot as lightning, crackling along their bones and burning them black. Her face was blotchy, and her bleeding hands curled into reddened fists. She lunged for the White Rabbit, but he dodged. Frances did not give up. She lunged again, snarling in fury, and he started running for his life, hopping madly up the slope and out of sight. Frances screamed after his retreating shadow. "You want us to kill your Jabberwock? Fine, we will kill it for you! We will bring you its
skin and its teeth for all of your friends to admire! And the next time you dare speak to me that way, you mangy animal, I will cut off your head!"

Frances was too easily manipulated, but at the same time Helen's heart ached, for only a fool would be ignorant of the reasons. How much grief Frances bore! How Helen wished she could carry some of the nightmares for her!

As she stood there, helpless but to watch, Frances' anger fled from her shoulders and her body went limp. The strings were cut, the words had driven themselves to exhaustion. She slumped to her knees gracelessly and did not move. Several moments passed, and only when Helen stirred was she interrupted by a sound from the obelisks, like teeth grinding together. The rocks groaned; the faces moved. Frances looked up blankly, and then she crawled over on her hands and knees, opening her red palms to catch two stone fragments as they fell from the mouths of the giants. They were the size of blackberries. The two fragments spoke, one after the other.

We hear voices, said Tweedledee.

They are like swords, said Tweedledum.

ACT II
THE RED AND THE WHITE

"What lies beyond the wall?" Frances asked.

The stones were ruins, and beyond the shambles they could see nothing but night — an expanse of darkness as thick and sticky as tar. This is the edge of the Red Country, Helen thought, and she was seized by the sudden urge to leap the wall, for it rose only to her waist. Leap it and walk until she could walk no more. A ridiculous notion, of course, and she shook it aside, turning her attention back to Frances, who stood with Tweedledee resting in her outstretched hand.

Three days of walking, and two nights of swimming, Tweedledee said. A forest of nettles, a tower of poppies. And then London.

"London!" Frances barked in laughter.

"Are there gates to the Red Country from London then?" Helen said. "I mean to say, there must be. It is such a very big city."

There are three gates in England, spoke Tweedledum, who traveled in Helen's pocket. There is one by Montclair Manor where you come from, one in a clockmaker's shop in London, and the third is inside a graveyard, though no one is quite sure which graveyard it is.

Frances intoned:
"Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds."

"You surprise me," Helen said. "I hadn't thought you paid attention during class at all."

"Only the exciting bits," Frances said, smiling. "The day we read Thomas Gray happened to be the day Agatha Gilbert set her skirt on fire, do you remember?"

"With great reluctance," Helen replied. She touched the stones of the failing wall, their scratched bodies, and said to their companions, "Why have you brought us here?"

So that you may see, said Tweedledee.

So that you may believe, said Tweedledum.

"See and believe what?" Helen wanted to know. "I was under the impression we would go hunting for the Jabberwock. Is it here?"

The Jabberwock lives in the Madlands, except when it leaves its nest to feed and destroy, said Tweedledum. We have brought you here for a different reason. So that you may know we do not lie when we say we have waited for you for a very long time.

"Whatever do you mean?" Frances said. She was enjoying this, that much was apparent. Her former despair seemed vanished, though Helen knew otherwise; it slept still, in Frances' brow and in the dark, angry way she would look at things. But Frances played the part of an eager, spoiled guest quite perfectly, leading the stone brothers wherever they wished to go.

One thousand steps north along the wall, said Tweedledee, and then look for the stone with the red stain.

The sun was bright today, though only to the edges of Night Beyond the Wall, where it sliced off cleanly like a cauterized wound. Frances opened her violet parasol with a snap of her wrist. She looked to Helen, who shook her head; she had brought no parasol of her own. Frances raised her eyebrows in mock horror. "But your ladylike skin!" she said, and Helen began walking north rather than reply.

The wall was teeth-ragged, some parts of it high enough that Helen could see its former glory, and other parts so eroded that they resembled a mere handful of stones on the grass, like children's games of Scotch-hoppers. Three hundred steps north along the wall, and Helen came across a dead fox lying in a semi-circle of hyacinths — a tomb, an open mausoleum. "She was loved," Helen said quietly, and Frances, who walked leisurely behind her stopped and said:

"Yes." She lowered her parasol. "Even the animals know how."

Five hundred steps along the wall, and Helen stepped on a splatter of eggshells, so large and so white that she was dumbfounded.

Someone had painted on the wall, in ecru letters, All the king's horses and all the king's men.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "Was there ever a King of Wonderland?"

Many kings and many queens, said Tweedledum, warm against her hand where she rubbed him idly. And yet it is not their names that we call. When you sit the thrones in the Palace of the Red and the White, they shall be your vassals.
"There is a palace?" Helen said, amused.

It is built of blood and bone, Tweedle-dum told her. Its stomach was forged from the fire of dragons. It rests in the very northern tip of Wonderland, on the mountain that sings. I remember the glorious days when the queens would hold court, and all of Wonderland would pay tribute — gold and jewels and crumpets, oh!

"You say there were queens before, in the Palace of the Red and the White," Helen said. "Are Frances and I meant to be their successors? What happened to them?"

Caterpillar knows, Tweedle-dum said. All I remember is that one day they were there, and then they were gone. Perhaps they died. Perhaps they were eaten by the Jabberwock. Perhaps we imagined them. He paused and rustled in her pocket. However, when I first saw you, I had the strangest feeling that we had met before. Make of that what you will.

"One thousand steps!" Frances called. "We approach!"

Helen counted to the requisite one thousand and stopped. She knelt so that she could examine the wall, and there it was: the stone with the red stain. It seemed loose against the failing mortar, so she used her fingers to pry it apart, revealing a hollow space deep within the wall. Helen reached both hands in, and touched Chinese silk. She tugged at the package and felt it give way; with one smooth motion she dragged it out of the wall.

The silk was not wrapped tightly, and in her ministrations it swam aside easily enough that Helen could already see what it protected: two crowns, as small and as delicate as ice, one set with red rubies and the other with white diamonds. They flashed like scars in the sunlight. 

The Jabberwock will prove difficult to kill, said Tweedle-dee. If it were simple, we would have done it long ago! But we have gone against it, and others of our kind, and each time we fail. We are broken, we are smashed, we are gutted to our innards in its shining teeth.

Frances was examining the arabesque pattern painted on their teapot. They were gathered around the dining table in their cottage, and Helen had books splayed on her knees. The two crowns sat on their mantel, where Frances had dusted the old grime and dirt away; they had made efforts, since, to restore the cottage to some semblance of respectability, though there were still ruined edges of furniture and the occasional glass shard on the carpet.

"Perhaps it is unkillable," Helen said.

"Please," Frances said disdainfully. "What a terrible story that would make. 'And our heroines bravely faced the monster, readying their courage and their might, only to discover that nothing happened!'"

"If I may say so, you are hardly a convincing Lancelot," Helen said, looking up from her edition of Defoe.

"The Jabberwock will have weaknesses," Frances said. "We will find out what they are and use them against it."

Yes, said Tweedle-dum. The Jabberwock must have weaknesses. Caterpillar knows.

"Caterpillar, Caterpillar, Caterpillar, Caterpillar!" Frances retorted. "That is all I hear from
everyone around! If this Caterpillar is so wise and all-seeing, then where is he when we need him?"

Our first course of action must be to find the Caterpillar, Tweedledee said. Many years ago, he went to sleep, and then he vanished entirely from his home in Caterpillar's Cocoon. There is one animal, however, who may yet know where he is. He was Caterpillar's closest companion when Caterpillar was awake.

"Friends are useful for reliably tattling on each other," Frances agreed.

Helen was offended. "When have I ever tattled on you?"

"I don't mean you," Frances said impatiently. "You are as much of a paragon as they come. But I mean the other girls. Do you really not think that Agatha Gilbert wouldn't rat out Catherine if offered the right incentive, or a very nice dress?"

"I would not say they were true friends then," Helen said. Frances smiled and came over, sitting down on Helen's lap. Several of the books went tumbling to the floor as Frances threw her arms around Helen's neck.

"What are you doing?" Helen asked, struggling.

"I love you dearly. Have I ever mentioned that? I should endeavour to mention it at least twice a day, and three times when your eyes are as blue as they are now," Frances declared.

Helen could feel her face suffusing in an uncontrollable blush. "The Jabberwock," she reminded them. "If we have set our minds to slay it — and let it stand that I am still not quite sure this is our best use of time —, then we need to find the Caterpillar through the Caterpillar's friend. Who is this friend?"

The Cheshire Cat, said Tweedledum.

"We know him from our stories," Frances said. "One of my creations, if I recall correctly. Frustrating fellow, never gives a straight answer."

"Then of course he is your creation," Helen said. Frances poked two of her fingers into Helen's ribs, making Helen yelp.

"Harpy," Frances said affectionately. Her face lit up. "Oh! It occurred to me: we shall need weapons as well, to do the killing. I have always wanted to wield a sword, or perhaps an axe!" She clapped her hands together. "Yes, an axe! A big, heavy axe. Would it not be delicious, the idea of a small person like me with such a large weapon?"

"You are mad, you will hurt yourself with it," Helen said.

Tweedledum spoke. For weapons, you must pay a visit to the Silent Smith. He will provide you with what you need.

Frances slid off Helen's lap. "Excellent," she said. "Are we done our meals? Have we drank our tea? Yes? Then off to the Silent Smith we go!"

They returned to the chessboard valley. The brothers provided them directions to a western tree marked The Silent Smith, where Helen pulled on the tag, sweeping them to a dark cavern with glowing coals. The air was rent in pieces by the sound of metalwork as a large man with melon-sized muscles pounded a piece of steel with a hammer. He observed their arrival, but he said nothing — he was, after all, appropriately named.
We present to you the Queens of Wonderland, Tweedledum announced, but Frances cut him off.

"No," she said. "We have not earned that title yet."

Very well then, Tweedledum amended. We present to you The Honourable Frances Leviathan of Kent, and Miss Helen Dunn of Northumberland.

Frances swept a curtsy. Helen followed more sedately. The Silent Smith's motions stopped, and he turned his head slightly to gaze at them. It was a fierce gaze, a deep gaze, and Helen's curtsy swept lower because of it. He was the first human they had seen in the Red Country, and she could not help but want to impress him.

They come seeking their rightful weapons, said Tweedledee. Will you give them to them?

The Silent Smith responded by reaching into a chest at his feet, and producing, with no more effort than if he had been picking daisies, a large battle-axe. Frances cried out in delight, and rushed forward. He placed the axe into her greedy palms, watching her lift it and wield it three times. It did not seem heavy at all to her, and she looked to him, eyes gleaming. "Thank you," she said. "I shall call it Executioner."

Helen waited, but instead of finding her weapon, the Silent Smith returned to his work at the forge.

"Sir," she said, after a few minutes had passed. Frances was too busy swinging Executioner at phantom enemies to notice. "Sir!" Helen repeated, voice louder. "I think you have forgotten me."

The Silent Smith stopped his work, but he did not respond.

"I require a weapon as well," Helen said. "It need not be fancy. I do not want to burden you, or to presume. Perhaps you have a spare dagger lying around that you cannot sell. I would gladly take it from you."

He pursed his lips, and shook his head.

Frances finally stopped admiring her new axe. "Perhaps you aren't meant to be a warrior," she said. "My dear Helen, that is perfectly all right. I will do all the fighting, and you can do all the reading and governing. We will be a matched pair in that way."

Helen did not understand why Frances' words did not soothe her, or why she felt so upset, standing there in the hot forge with the Silent Smith watching her with old eyes under his craggy brow. "Never mind," Helen said brusquely. "It was a silly idea. I do not care." She wrapped her fingers around a hushed Tweedledum and walked out of the cave.

This was what they did: they waited. Weeks passed, and every day at Montclair Helen would anticipate the post, searching it for any letter addressed to her that would promise future employment, or at the very least indicate an interest in meeting her and discussing the matter further. There was one such letter asking for her references, but when Helen quickly sent her reply, another letter came in the mail, informing her that the position had already been filled.

Her first instinct was to fall back onto her bed and scream into the offending slip of paper. Instead, she tied up her hair and practiced her French subjunctive.
In the Red Country, there was a similar stasis. They were in agreement that they must find the Cheshire Cat so that he would divulge the whereabouts of the Caterpillar; but finding a feline that could turn invisible on a whim was proving difficult, to say the least. Helen made a day trip into the Archives of Wonderland, a small, circular library on the other side of the salty sea, where the librarian was a turtle who peered at her quizzically. She returned with stacks of yellowed documents, and private journals of denizens past and present. She settled in with them, rooting out any mention of the Cheshire Cat's habits and preferences.

Frances went on patrol. With Executioner slung over her shoulder, and Tweedledee tucked into the brim of her hat, she would disappear through the squares on the chessboard, returning later to the cottage on the hill to report her findings.

"The March Hare says he may or may not have seen the Cheshire Cat on Tuesday last week, at three in the morning," she said. "Or it might have been an oddly shaped piece of apple crumble."

"This is ridiculous!" Helen said.

"I know, and isn't it wonderful?" Frances said.

Helen sighed. "And what will you do when we find the Cheshire Cat? Swing your axe at the air until you feel a hit?"

Frances pressed her finger to her lips and smiled like a Renaissance Madonna. "I am coming up with a plan with the aid of the Silent Smith. You will see."

However, in the end, finding the Cheshire Cat was as much a matter of luck as it was a matter of foresight. Such was the case for many events in the Red Country, where the paths did not always lead a person where she meant to go, and where the clocks often struck four chimes, followed by eight, and then two. There were times when Helen examined the sky and was not sure if the sun was traveling east to west, or west to east. It was all a hopeless jumble, she thought, and so she decided not to put any particular significance into their finding the Cheshire Cat during a visit to the abandoned Caterpillar's Cocoon, where he had been hiding all along.

Frances had scoured the Caterpillar's Cocoon many times previous, but this time was different. This time she halted in her steps halfway through the boneyard, and she lifted her hand like a field general, five fingers splayed, the same way she played the pianoforte. "I see something," she said. "Over to our right."

Helen obediently looked, and yes, she saw it too: a glimmer in the air like a heat wave. "I do believe that might be him," she murmured.

"Very likely," Frances said. She wore a dress of deep reds and blacks, a funereal dress that she did not own at Montclair, but which she wore in the Red Country like snakeskin. Today she had a scarf as well, as red as a sailor's morning, made of silk with lace. She unwound it slowly and then wrapped it over the bottom of her face, covering her nose and her mouth. "Cover yours too," she told Helen, voice muffled through the scarf, and Helen suffered a moment of confusion, followed by a moment of protest — Frances should have explained her plans rather than spring them on Helen like this!

She covered her mouth and her nose with one hand, and watched on as Frances pulled out two silver balls, each the size of a hen's egg. They did not seem entirely solid; their viscous surface shifted as Frances touched them, depressing where her thumbs clawed in.

"The Silent Smith made these at my request," Frances said conversationally. "Did you know he specializes in all types of weapons, not only those made out of iron and steel?" She hefted one of
the silver balls in her left hand. She gave it a long, considering look; and then she reared back and threw it in the direction of the airy glimmer like a cricket pitcher.

The silver ball exploded in mid-air. A grey smoke billowed out at a rapid pace, and Helen coughed into her hand as it advanced on the rest of the Caterpillar's Cocoon, thickening the air with the smell of ashes. The Caterpillar's Cocoon must have been lovely once, a lush, verdant piece of the Red Country's forest, with daffodils mixing with tiger lilies. Now, it was a boneyard, where the dead cocoon had hardened into white cartilage, and ribs poked out of the dirt where the foliage might once have been. Under the smoke, the ribs turned black, and the cocoon looked like a sooty train engine in the midst of a fog.

Helen heard a howl from where the Cheshire Cat was supposed to be — a painful sound, a cat with his tail stepped on. Then there was a low mewl, and the sound of heavy panting, a struggle for breath.

Helen started feeling light-headed herself; the smoke was very thick now, and it was difficult to see. Frances had become a silhouette, a few snatches of red to orient Helen's vision, but not much else. "Is this poison?" Helen finally asked, lifting her arm to cover as much of her orifices as she could.

"It is a feast," Frances replied, and then she threw the second silver ball. Helen readied herself, feet spread apart. The second silver ball exploded in a fireworks display of pink and yellow, and it produced a fine dust that rained down from the sky and onto everything beneath it. It settled onto Helen's clothes like pollen, and she tried her utmost not to sneeze.

The dust settled onto the Cheshire Cat, outlining him clearly as he lay some distance away, gasping on the cold ground.

Frances stepped delicately around the ribs, and stood over him. "Hello," she said. "Would you please tell us where to find the Caterpillar?"

"It is... not so much... a matter of... where," wheezed the Cheshire Cat, whose teeth were alarmingly white even in the smoke. "You have not... even asked... when, what, why, or how."

"I have no patience for your riddles, cat," Frances said.

"Patience... is of no use... when solving riddles," the Cheshire Cat said. "Patience... is a poor substitute... for cleverness." He shuddered as the smoke traveled deeper into his lungs, and his tail twitched harshly.

"Well," Frances said, all pleasantness leaving her face, replaced now by an expression of cool disdain. "As my friend Helen will tell you, I am not patient nor am I very clever."

"Then why should... I fear you?" asked the Cheshire Cat.

Frances placed her foot on his torso and pressed down. The Cheshire Cat yelped in pain, and his eyes closed.

"Because I am not very kind either," Frances said. "Oh, I've tried! I have tried to be courteous and compassionate, to treat all my peers with the respect they most likely do not deserve. But this is the Red Country — are we not meant to be true to our nature here? You are coy, and I am cruel."

"Barbarian!" said the Cheshire Cat, and there might have been a smile on his face, until Frances pressed down even harder, and his blood pooled out in slow waves.

"Mrs. Henley always said I was impossible to civilize," Frances replied. Her lips were a straight
line now, pressed tight and meaningful. "Now tell me, cat, or I will have your grinning head as a centerpiece for my table."

Helen called out. "Frances, this seems overly—"

"This is not Montclair," Frances said. "You are not Head Girl here."

"Head Girl!" the Cheshire Cat said, opening his eyes again. "Yes... I see now... but perhaps you are wrong, Little Miss Barbarian. You have... strong hands and feet and bones... but your eyes. Have you seen a physician about them?"

"Shut your mouth," Frances said.

"Then how am I... to tell you what you want?" The Cheshire Cat wheezed in laughter, and Frances stomped. He screamed.

"Stop it," Helen said. "Frances, really, that is unnecessary."

But Frances leaned down and brought her face to the Cheshire Cat's faltering grin. She hissed, "I have seen a man kill a woman with no more effort than if he had been polishing his shoes. I could kill you even more easily."

"Then why should I give you anything?" the Cheshire Cat replied.

"Because," Frances said, "I could kill you not so easily as well." She reached behind her shoulders and touched the edge of Executioner, which she wore strapped to her back like a beloved child. "There are those one can charm, and there are those one cannot charm and must therefore destroy. The only reason right now that you still draw breath is because I want information from you. I am willing to go a great length for that information — perhaps we shall experiment. You are an interesting creature. Perhaps you will talk even after you are dead." She removed Executioner from its straps and raised it.

"Stop!" the Cheshire Cat gasped. "Very well. I am a coward." He licked his tongue over his teeth, and grimaced. "The Old Gardens. Look to the Old Gardens."

Frances lowered her axe.

"Will you take me prisoner now?" the Cheshire Cat sneered. His voice was stronger, but fear had created a patina of red veins over his large, slitted pupils.

"No, we shall not," Helen said, stepping forward. Frances shifted, but Helen moved between her and the fallen cat. "We shall set you free. You have done a great service for us, even if it was not of your own choice."

"Are you sure?" Frances asked. "He could be useful again."

Helen looked at her friend steadily. "I am sure," she said, and while she had occasionally been given reason to doubt Frances' convictions, her moral choices, and even her sanity at various points in the past, she had never doubted Frances' affection for her. So Frances nodded, and allowed Helen to attend to the Cheshire Cat's wounds.

"So you are the sweet one," he said.

"I am not sweet," Helen corrected. "Sweet is for young ladies with fans and mild conversational topics. I like to think that I am just."
"Just what?" the Cheshire Cat mocked.

Helen finished ripping the hems of her skirt and tying them over his wounds. "They may become infected," she told him. "The poison may further damage you. I would advise seeking a physician, if there are any in this country."

Frances, still with her cold and determined countenance, said, "Remember that we can find you again, always."

The Cheshire Cat rose to his paws unsteadily. He teetered, and the wind whispered through the bone and the field. Then he laughed. "Long live the queens," he said, and vanished.

Helen washed the blood from her hands under the cottage's pump. The water was cold and harsh, and she scrubbed underneath her fingernails while Frances stood over her shoulder and was quiet.

"Is this the sort of queen we want to be?" Helen said at last. "I do not disagree that the Cheshire Cat was recalcitrant and we needed unusual methods for him to speak, but you — you hurt him badly."

"He will heal," Frances said.

"How do you know?"

"The poison is not permanently damaging," Frances said. "And according to your records, the Cheshire Cat has been about since the very dawn of the Red Country. An animal with such survival skills will not die from being stepped on." She made a face. "Honestly, Helen. I wouldn't have actually killed him. I merely wanted him to believe so."

Helen wiped her hands on her skirts. "Do you mean it?" she asked.

"Why, does it bother you?" Frances asked.

"I do not want to see you become like your father," Helen said, and Frances paled. She regretted the words almost as quickly as she had said them, and she offered reparation by touching the birdlike bones of Frances' jaw. Frances could rarely abide others touching her, but she had never complained about Helen. "I am sorry," Helen said. "I did not mean it.

"Of course you meant it," Frances said, "and you would be right." She turned her face away and looked towards the cliffs and the sea. "Do you know what sort of queen I want to be?"

Helen waited.

"Unforgivable," Frances said. "So far above the drudgery and the mundane that it would not even occur to people that they could forgive me for anything I might do. Do we ever speak of forgiving God? Do we ever speak of forgiving the Devil?" She took a shuddering breath, her lashes dark and spiked. "Which is all to say, the people we feel the need or the capacity to forgive are human, and I am tired of being human. It exhausts me."

"But," Helen said, "isn't that what makes it worthwhile?"

"When have you ever needed to work for anything?" Frances argued. "It all comes so naturally to
you. You are smart and skillful and respected, and it is as if you don't even break a sweat!"

"I am also in need of employment, and I have a large scar that bisects my nose and my forehead," Helen said waspishly. "Would you like to take them instead?"

Frances huffed a small laugh. "I told you, the scar is not so bad."

"And I told you, practice your manners more and stop taunting our teachers, and you will have a smooth time of it," Helen replied. "Act the part. Then one day, when you are older and married to a rich, handsome man who loves you madly, you will return to Montclair, and you will dangle your donations in front of their noses, and watch them beg for you."

Frances wrapped her arms around herself, to ward off the mid-evening chill. The wind lifted strands of her hair from her face and her neck. "I don't think I shall ever find a husband," she said. "I don't think I shall ever want to."

Helen continued drying her hands, though there was no more moisture left. "How will you make your way through the world then?" she asked. "I do not mean to be hard-nosed about it! But I don't think you are suited to working as a governess like me, not someone of your station."

"I wish..." Frances swallowed against her throat. "I wish we could stay in the Red Country forever. I wish we could live here and be queens truly. You and I. No one else."

Helen hid her flustered pleasure. "I do enjoy our times here," she confessed. "I hadn't thought I would at first."

"That is because you need me to show you the way," Frances said impishly, and when Helen's hands were clean, they walked across the cliff, and back into the chessboard valley, and then through the woods to Montclair. It was night-time, and they snuck through the servants' entrance as they always did, Frances as their vanguard, using her knowledge of the teachers' night-time habits to pave a safe path through the manor and back to their dormitory. The other girls were still asleep — once, Martha Corrick had woken in time to witness their return, but Helen had explained that one of the younger girls had taken ill, and they had gone to soothe her. Martha had accepted that explanation, and had spoken no more of it.

"She probably thinks we are Sapphic lovers," Frances whispered as they undressed.

"Frances!" Helen exclaimed, fumbling with her buttons.

"She would if she had any sort of scandalous imagination, which she does not," Frances replied, wriggling underneath her covers. "Good night, dear Helen! Good night!"

"Sleep well," Helen said, and they did.

There was a growing sense of unreality to their life and schooling at Montclair. When Helen first happened upon it, she was faintly disturbed, for unlike Frances, this was a world that she both understood and appreciated, a world where matters were not always fair but they made sense. If she wrote the proper address on a letter, then, provided the weather was decent and the postal service halfway competent, it would be delivered to said address. Places did not shift; animals did not talk. She woke up every day and went through her routine and her lessons. The Red Country had not changed that. As powerful as it seemed, it was no match for German inflections or the steps required for a proper quadrille.

Yet it was not the same either. What else would explain the sudden shock Helen would feel, looking down at her fingers as she worked on her embroidery? These fingers have turned invisible, she would think. Or, she would be with Miss Travers, poring over Miss Travers' handful
of books, and she would think *These wrists have touched the metal of an ancient crown.*

Spring progressed at Montclair, turning the skies blue and the grounds filthy wet. Helen's shoes were caked in liquid mud more often than not, and when she led the younger girls to town on a Sunday, she found vendors who sold wildflowers, sprigs wrapped into bundles with twine.

Their colour was not nearly as vivid as the flowers in the Red Country, and yet when Helen touched them, they felt heavier.

Frances said very little outside of the Red Country, as was her wont. When they were with the other girls, she would sometimes act as if she was barely cognisant of Helen's existence. Helen was mostly used to this — she knew it was difficult for Frances to be as open when the likes of Catherine Walton were in the same room. But there were times when Frances' silence sank as deep as an anchor, and Helen was troubled by it.

Frances was still fond of disappearing without warning, and reappearing only when no one expected her. Helen could not help but wonder if she was visiting the Red Country on her own. When she broached the subject, Frances said, "It is our creation. I would have no interest in visiting it without you."

Helen looked at Frances' mouth, at the shine of her forehead, and excused the lie.

She was hardly the only person at school interested in Frances' recent behaviour. Mr. Montclair the Younger seemed to have developed an interest as well. Helen feared that he was close to discovering their Red Country trips, no matter how careful they were to hide them. "I think he knows," she told Frances one afternoon when they were sent to fetch a package for the headmaster from town. "He is always watching so intently us during class and mealtimes, and the other night, I could have sworn I saw his face in the window when we were crossing the lawn."

"He does not know," Frances replied.

"We need to take more precautions. I think we should wear darker colours when we leave the grounds, for one, and —" Helen stopped. "What do you mean, he does not know? Am I not laying out my reasons for suspicion?"

"Mr. Montclair the Younger is watching us, to be sure," Frances said, "but it is not because he knows about our clandestine activities."

"Then what is it?" Helen asked. "I saw him speak to you the other day. He cornered you after dinner, and you did not return to the dormitory for at least half an hour! What does he want then?" Even as she spoke, she could feel the unpleasant squirm begin in her belly, as if the answer was already resting there.

"What does he want?" Frances said, stepping around a puddle unblinkingly. "What every man of relative authority, moderate balding, and middling vitality wants. A kiss."

The Old Gardens was the first province of the Red Country Helen saw that was not damaged in any way. It stood as a testament to majesty, with petals like eclipses, closed in on themselves and then expanding everywhere, slowly revealing the hearts of the flowers. Wisteria and honeysuckle climbed the marble fountains, and the air was as thickly sweet as the nights when Frances dreamt her nightmares. Fat bees bobbed along the primrose path, and butterflies the colour of saffron lit
on their wrists, dazzling with their wings before bursting into flame.

The willow trees bent like supple rivers, and their shadows fell to the ground in swirls of sugar patterns. Yet Helen felt more apprehension here than any other province she had been in; at least the mouldering walls and the overturned cottage had been straightforward with their intentions. The Old Garden she could imagine being the pleasure dome of princesses and courtiers, and that entire realm of deception she had no use for.

*I must grow used to it, however,* she thought. *For Frances’ sake, and for the sake of our adventures here.*

Neither of them could spy any indication of the Caterpillar, which made Frances mutter about the treachery of cats. Helen encouraged them to keep searching, for the gardens were larger than they looked from the outside, and every turn revealed another corner tucked away, glittering with jeweled opulence. They made their way, in this slow fashion, to what appeared to be the heart of the garden, in which there were two deep holes dug into the ground. *Rabbit holes,* Helen thought with a sandpaper brand of amusement. Two brass poles curled out of each hole; they resembled coat racks. Each of them held an envelope in a butterfly clip.

The envelope on the right was addressed, in a bold stormy script: *For the Faithless.*

The envelope on the left: *For the Heartless.*

Frances’ mouth quirked. "Well now, this is interesting. I imagine we are supposed to part ways here and go down our own path to the Caterpillar. But who is the Faithless and who is the Heartless?"

"It is a childish joke," Helen said. "It does not describe us at all."

"Yet here we are, playing the game, and playing by the rules." Frances stepped to the envelope on the right. "You are the daughter of a vicar. I highly doubt you are faithless, so let us divide it like that. Simple enough?"

"Simple enough," Helen agreed. She took the envelope that said *For the Heartless,* and then gazed down the rabbit hole, which ran so deep that all she could see was black. "You have Executioner with you? You will protect yourself if something goes badly?"

"I'm not the one we should worry about," Frances said. "You still lack a weapon."

Helen lifted her head and regarded the trees, the flowers, the slow-moving bees. In the lethargy of the Old Gardens, she could feel her own blood slugging through her veins. "I will be all right," she said, though she was no soothsayer; she did not know the truth of it at all. But what other choice did they have? Two rabbit holes, two paths, and Frances was right: they had to play the game by its own rules, for the Red Country was larger and more capricious than either of them.

So Helen jumped.

A long way down, and a parade of chequered images and mirrors, a menagerie of assorted oddities. She closed her eyes so that her head would stop spinning, and then she landed on a patch of soft blue grass, sprawling on her hands and knees. It hurt, but not for very long. She stood up.

"I have always wondered about the self-awareness of young English ladies, but now I better understand," said the Caterpillar, who watched her from his leafy throne. A golden pipe dangled from his mouth. Helen stared. He was incredibly large, larger than the caboose of a train, and striped in shockingly bright shades of blue, green, and purple, the lightest beginning around his face and then darkening all the way down. His eyes were black; he rested them on her as if she
were no more fascinating than a dust mote.

"To be a young lady in England," said Helen, "is to live with nothing but your own self-awareness." There was a chessboard set in front of the Caterpillar, carved out of teak. One chair had been arranged to play white. Helen pulled the chair out and took a seat.

"Sadly, I will never know," the Caterpillar said between puffs of smoke. "I will only ever be a caterpillar, at least until the day I become a butterfly."

"According to everything that I have read, you have been a caterpillar for a very long time without being a butterfly," Helen said. "Why is that?"

"My dear," the Caterpillar said, "do you wish to grow up?"

Helen said nothing.

"When we reach our full potential, why, there is nothing left to do after that," the Caterpillar said.

Helen curled her fingers around a white pawn. "Pawn to e4," she said. "How does one kill the Jabberwock?"

The Caterpillar exhaled in purple fumes. "Pawn to d5," he said, and monarch butterflies flew to move his pawn for him, lifting the piece in the air and setting it down on the correct square. "The question is not how one kills the Jabberwock, but why. Has my friend the Cheshire Cat not explained that already?"

"Pawn to d5," she said, taking his pawn. "It is not my ambition to kill the Jabberwock, but everyone we meet tells us it must be done. The Jabberwock is a monster who is slowly destroying the Red Country with its hunger. Is such a threat not meant to be eliminated?"

"Queen to d5," he said. "Don't mistake me, girl. I want to see the Jabberwock dead as much as anybody. He drove me from my home. He ate my sons and daughters."

Helen moved her knight. "Knight to e3," she said. "Can you truly see the future?"

"Queen to a5," he responded. "What else does one do with the future? You cannot play ball with it, you cannot dress it up in ribbons to model the new fashions, you cannot do the dishes with it."

She examined the board. "Pawn to d4," she said. "I will not ask what you see for me. I will frankly admit that I don't want to know."

"An unusual answer," he said. "Pawn to c6."

"Is it?" Helen replied. "Knight to f3."

"You are so insistent on seeing yourself as an ordinary girl," the Caterpillar mused. His eyes turned silver before flickering to black. "So respectable, so unremarkable! Clever enough, and strong-willed enough, but never one to cause trouble. Always the one to get her friends out of trouble instead. What a sterling image you have crafted for yourself! Bishop to g4."

"I haven't crafted anything," Helen said. "Bishop to f4."

"Then you have hid yourself, as the larva hides itself among layers," the Caterpillar said. "You have allowed Frances to be remarkable. Pawn to e6."

"Frances is remarkable," Helen argued. "Pawn to h3."
"But how then do you think you crossed the gate into Wonderland?" the Caterpillar asked. "Oh, did you think just anybody would be able to stumble here? Use your head, girl! How many people have walked through the woods before, in all of its history?" Another smoky breath. "Bishop to f3."

Helen stirred with feeling for the first time. "I am using my head," she said, for she hated to be accused of laziness. "Queen to f3." She took his bishop.

"Be sure to keep it on your shoulders then," the Caterpillar said. "Bishop to b4."

"All of this is nonsense," Helen said. "I shouldn't be sidetracked. I am here to ask you how to kill the Jabberwock. Bishop to e2."

"The Jabberwock does not bleed," the Caterpillar said. "No arrows nor axes will slow it. It is immune to fire, ice, and poison. It can smell fear and track you under a moonless sky. "Knight to d7."

"I have heard tales that it is invincible," Helen said. "They trouble me. Frances is convinced that nothing is invincible, but Frances is often optimistic. Pawn to a3."

"A misjudgement on your part," the Caterpillar said. "Your friend Frances is never optimistic. She fears and expects to be destroyed every day, and that is why she acts the way she does." He castled.

"Pawn to b4," she said, taking his bishop.

"What an interesting move," he said. "Queen to a1."

Helen tempered her smile. "How do you kill the Jabberwock?" she asked again, tucking her hair behind her ears. "King to d2."

"There is a sword," the Caterpillar said. "It is called the vorpal sword. It has long been deemed lost, but those who think so are fools. It is not lost; it is hidden, in the maze under the sea, not far from where your own little cottage lies. The vorpal sword is the only weapon that can harm the Jabberwock. It has been waiting for you for a long time, my girl." He moved his piece. "Queen to h1."

Helen touched her own queen, studying its ridged curves before speaking. "One more question. Why am I the Heartless and Frances the Faithless? Or did we get it right?" She made her move. "Bishop to a6, and checkmate."

The Caterpillar peered down at the board, at the butterflies crowning her hair. "You are brilliant, Miss Helen Dunn," he said, while Helen neither acknowledged nor protested that remark. "Yet
"What did the Caterpillar say to you?" Frances asked as they walked back to the manor. "You must tell me everything."

"He told me about the vorpal sword, which I already related to you," Helen replied. "There was not much else of interest. He was fond of hearing his own voice, I'm afraid. And losing badly at chess."

"You devil!" Frances said. "You never told me you were good at chess."

"My older brother Allan and I used to play when we were younger." Helen shrugged dismissively. "Not often, though. Allan preferred horses, and then we lost most of our pieces and were forced to play with pebbles, which was never as exciting."

"Look at you," Frances said, warmth in her voice. Helen felt a muscle underneath her throat tighten, but she gave Frances a quick smile before nudging open the door to the servants' passage and looking both ways to make sure no one was about. Mr. Montclair the Younger's recent attentions were on her mind. She did not fancy bumping into him at this hour, where no doubt he would march them straight to his father and his aunt, and they would be forced to think of extravagant lies to explain their night-time whereabouts.

It was not Mr. Montclair the Younger and his vested interest, particularly in Frances, that was to be their concern. Halfway up the narrow, winding staircase, there was a closed door where the staircase was to open near the kitchens. And tucked in front of that closed door, so certain of their own privacy, was Catherine Walton, with her arms around an older man with a neatly trimmed beard.

"Oh," Helen said.

Catherine leaped apart from the man, and her hair was unpinned and the top of her dress in a state of dishabille. "I — I —," Catherine Walton stammered, while the man struggled to readjust his trousers.

Frances spoke first. Helen wanted to warn her off, but did not have the opportunity before Frances' voice was cutting through the staircase. "Why, this is marvelous," Frances said, in tones of utmost irony. "Just yesterday I believe you were insinuating that I was a whore because of my sister's particular occupation — and yet here you are!"

Catherine Walton turned red, and her male friend stiffened.

"Now, see here," he said. "This is a misunderstanding. I was helping Miss Walton with a matter, and she happened to trip and stumble, hence our state of wardrobe."

"Oh yes?" Frances asked politely. "What was the matter?"

"Er," he said.

"Was it the grave, serious matter of your manhood in her cunny?" Frances said, and Helen was as shocked as anyone else at her crudeness.
"There is — no such — why, how dare you —" the man stammered, and Catherine Walton's eyes flashed with fire.

"Shut your mouth, Frances," she said. "You know nothing about this, and if you dare spread your nasty little lies, I will make sure that no ballroom in the entire country will ever receive you."

"However shall I survive such an indignity?" Frances said drolly. She seemed blase, but Helen could see the almost fiendish pleasure that jostled underneath. This would turn out badly, she thought, but they had gone beyond a point where she could resolve it with a few well-chosen words. And it was quite improper for Catherine to have brought this man to Montclair. Never mind even the matter of desire — to give a stranger access to a household of sleeping girls was no carefree circumstance.

"I must confess, my surprise is at a minimum," Frances went on. "I suppose this gentlemen is of your usual flavour — tall, bearded, old enough to be your father — but he is not nearly as handsome as that stable hand you were with last month, or even the preacher before then."

Catherine's face grew mottled with rage, while the man blinked twice and then addressed her. "What does she mean, my dear?" he asked.

"Nothing," Catherine hissed. "She is a liar."

"Ask anybody at the Three Candles Inn," Frances said. "Oh sweet Cat, that is what happens when you think I am less than nothing. You simply fail to notice me when I am there. I assure you, though, I fail to notice little. The size of that one fellow! Well."

Catherine whirled around to face her suitor. "Do you even know who this girl is? She is Viscount Esterbrook's daughter. Can you trust a single word she says? Her mouth is poison!"

"And yet you are so eager to discredit me," Frances replied. "If you were truly innocent, would none of this matter?"

"Me?" Catherine sputtered. "Let me ask what you and Miss Dunn were doing, out on the grounds so late at night. I hear the whispers about you two, about the unnatural practices that you —"

"Everybody, lower your voices," Helen said sharply. "Unless you want to bring the entire household running."

"No need," Frances said. "I shall be on my way to bed now. Goodnight, Miss Walton. Good night, sir whoever-you-are. I wish you all the satisfaction in your no doubt breathlessly happy affair." She moved past Catherine, who blocked her way roughly.

"I will be the end of you," Catherine hissed. "You monster's child."

Frances shoved at Catherine until Catherine finally relented and moved aside, releasing passage to the doorway. The bearded man seemed confused and hesitant, looking at both girls with funny corkscrew turns of his head. Helen followed Frances in time to see Frances slide against Catherine on her way out, and hear her murmur, "I may be a monster's child, but may I never be so wretched as you."

Helen plunged into the sea.
The pain locked her bones together; the coldness make her skin feel as it would peel from her muscles, and she gasped, lungs filling with salt and water. The vorpal sword, she thought, for that was why she had come here to the sea, where she knew little of swords and even less of swimming. In her home, with her brothers Allan and Henry, there was a pond where they would vanquish long summer afternoons while their mother kept a stern eye on them — but that was a pond, and comparing that to this experience would be like comparing an island to a continent.

Underneath the water was a large stone maze, with walls reaching the heights of houses, and from the cliff where she had jumped, she had been fortunate enough not to dash herself against one of the walls — but she could not see beyond them, and was forced to trawl the maze through, swimming down, down, down, and then back up, gasping for air above the foaming waters.

She could see Frances still on the cliff, peering down. Helen tried to call to her, but Frances was too far. If Helen squinted, she could make out what appeared to be an encouraging wave. If she strained her ears while treading water desperately, she could hear the faintest snatch of a voice — was that concern? Or it could have just as easily been mild curiosity. Frances was not afraid, nor was she jealous that Helen seemed to have been chosen to wield the famous sword. I am happy with Executioner, was what she said on the subject, and they had discussed it no further.

Helen inhaled heavily before ducking back down, paddling her arms and legs so that they would lead her through the maze. It was difficult to think – easy enough during the chess game, but she had had air then, a rather helpful commodity that she missed sorely now, swimming through the rough stone teeth that rose from the ploughed sea ground, confusing her way. Nets of kelp and seaweed hung between the pillars, so thick and so tangled that they seemed like doors. There was a sound that moved behind them, almost like music – almost like a new world existed if she would simply swim through.

She did not. Surfacing for another gasp of air, she renewed her resolve to search find the heart of the maze. She dove for the umpteenth time, keeping her eyes open, even though the salt should sting. It does not matter, it does not matter, she reminded herself, as her legs began to ache and a throb appeared in her abdomen, beating out an uncomfortable, stretching rhythm.

Left, she thought, swimming left. Right, left, left, right again, oh wait no, this was a bad choice. She retraced her paces, and then chose the righthand path, wishing she had brought along a piece of chalk, though what good chalk would do in the middle of the sea, she had no idea.

The fish that swam past her were bronze and silver, clockwork toys, with their large empty eyes, and their whirring tails.

Tell me, Helen beckoned. They did not speak, but she heard their voices anyway, observing what directions they came and went, and where the most schools were gathered.

The water turned darker the further she went, and by this she knew that she had made the right decision. It changed from a clear grey, the colour of the raining sky above them, to an inky nighttime black, so that Helen had more difficulty seeing by the minute. She was forced to brace her hand along the walls, half swimming and half floating, fumbling through the shadowy water until even the fish were a faint memory — they were replaced by a wintry ice that she was forced to break through, cutting her hands on the pieces until they were bloody.

Her blood made embroidered swirls in the water, illuminating the relentless black.

I must be near, she thought after a while, when her lungs burned and her head ached. She was no longer certain if it were true, or if she wanted it to be true.

Another resurfacing, another glimpse of Frances on the cliff.
Then back down, smashing through the ice, banging it with her fists and her feet, choking on the bitter coldness – and there, there, she saw it! Deep at the bottom of an obsidian crypt, a shine of steel like starlight. Helen dove faster and with rejuvenated strength, turning the ice around her into flotsam and jetsam. Her skin grew numb and dead; her body felt like it would turn into stone and she would sink to the bottom, living there forevermore. No! Helen thought, screaming it in her mind. She was so close! Just a few strokes more, a few strokes more, she could see the pommel of the vorpal sword jut through the black water.

She thought of her parents, of her brothers, of their little house in the north, with the chickens and her father’s study, and the sound of her mother singing as she did the mending.

She thought of Montclair, of the Gothic wallpaper, of the crooked corridors, of Miss Travers and all the rest, sitting at long tables for breakfast, working over sputtering oil lamps at night.

She thought of the cottage in the Red Country that she and Frances called home, how they had restored it, how they had loved it, the cakes on their platters, the books on their shelves.

The maze in the sea, and yet Helen thought, I know the way. She burst through with one last push, her hands grabbing the vorpal sword. It slipped once, threatening to fall into the depths – she grabbed it again. Then she was swimming upwards, to the surface, as quickly as she could, straining with exhaustion. Just a little bit more, just a little bit more – and then, there, the sky, the loveliest thing she had seen, and air, air, air, and a sword in her hand.

As sharp as a sword, a letter.

Before the letter there was the grass, and before the grass, there was the sampler in Helen's hands as she worked over her needlepoint, choosing daffodil yellow threads to compliment the blue of her sampler's sea. When Frances leaned over her shoulder to look, Helen pointed it out. "It is a sailboat, you see," she said. The weather was even finer today than yesterday, and the teachers had allowed the older girls to work on their crafts on the school lawn. Helen sat with Frances, and in the distance, under the poplar trees, they could see Dolores Kember with Sophie James, Sophie struggling to tear out a bad stitch.

"The sea," Frances marveled. Her own embroidery was a wretched mess on her lap. She was hopeless at it.

"Did you worry?" Helen was compelled to ask. Frances arched her perfect black brows at her, but Helen persisted. "When I went under the water, I must have been gone for so long. Did you worry?"

"Why would I worry?" Frances replied. "Is there a task you have ever failed at before?"

"Oh, how flattering," Helen said, but she smiled and touched the flat of Frances' fingers with her knuckles. Then she remembered what else she had wanted to say, and her voice dropped into lower registers. "I do not think we should be so judging of Catherine Walton."

"Were we judging her?" Frances asked, flicking at stray hairs on her forehead.

"I know that you were," Helen said. "You simply wish to hear me name her sin and be vulgar."
"It is a joy," Frances agreed.

"A joy that I shall not grant you," Helen said. "I know that Catherine is rude and impossible. I dislike her as well. But I do not think that makes her a... well, what you implied that she was. It is not the same thing at all." You should understand that, Helen privately thought, considering the matter of your sister.

Frances stared at her. "You have strong feelings on whores?"

Helen refused to flush, and she exerted great control over her own body in order not to. It would not do for Frances to see her flush. "I mean that I feel sorry for women who are accused in that way. There was a lady in my father's parish, quite young. She used to come into our house and help my mother with chores. Then one year, she had... she had an affair with a sailor, and everything seemed to change. She became fallen. My father would no longer allow her to be near us. The entire town shunned her, and she wasted away out of misery the next winter." Helen's hands moved more quickly over her sampler, smoothing out the strands. "I understand his decision. Of course I do! There must be proper codes of behaviour under God. But I knew this woman. I knew that she had a sweet nature, and that she had loved him, and he had very cruelly tricked her."

"Are you saying that Catherine Walton is a poor victim of a malicious rake?" Frances asked. "I cannot imagine you are accusing her of a sweet nature."

"What if it is love?" Helen asked.

"It is not love," Frances said. "Unless our Catherine's love is wide and expansive." She peered at Helen, and then scrambled to her knees. "Do not tell me you are one of those Rescue Society women who trumpet about compassion for whores and raising fallen women above their station. I had not thought you the kind."

Frances' words struck a vein of anger inside Helen. "What does it matter, what kind of woman I am?" she asked more fiercely. "That is precisely my point! I am tired — I am tired — I am tired of being told what kind of woman I am."

"Catherine Walton sends letters to Mr. Montclair the Younger, pretending they are from me," Frances interrupted.

Helen fell silent.

"They are love letters," Frances said, as if she had not just struck Helen into astonishment. "They detail just how desperately I want to be with him. He has approached me many times now. I have tried to explain that they are not from me, that it is a trick, but he will not believe me. He thinks I am playing a game."

Helen's fury grew anew. "How dare she!" she said. "I don't understand. This feud between you two. Why does she hate you so?"

Frances lifted her eyes; they were gleaming with hard mirth. "Because you are right. It was love, once. The summer before last, before we returned to school. We were in London together, and there was a baron's son she badly wanted to marry. When I saw, I made sure to pay an inordinate amount of attention to him, and he soon forgot entirely about her."

"Why?" Helen demanded. None of this made sense to her. Was this was the rich and titled did, taunt and destroy each other?

"Because the year before that, she tripped my sister in the middle of rainy street," Frances said.
"And the year before that, she spilled soup over a portrait over my mother, while I humiliated her in front of a modiste. What does it matter?" she cried. "She treated me poorly, so I enacted my revenge! And now we are almost full grown, and she is still treating me poorly, so I still enact my revenge! We go in circles. What does a few salacious letters signify? My reputation is already ruined."

"I will speak to her," Helen said grimly. She stood and began marching towards the east end of the lawn, where Catherine Walton was with her usual gaggle of younger girls, holding court and offering bites of the French biscuits her father had sent to her by post. Before Frances could stop her, Helen was already looming over Catherine, who blinked up at her, and then went ashen pale.

"No," she said, "no, no, no, Frances, I see that look on your face... you did not, tell me you did not..."

Helen twisted around to look at Frances, who had followed her. Frances was smiling a tiger's smile, her curls dark and feral around her face.

"You told them about me," Catherine whispered, and it was as if she had forgotten the younger girls around her, who began piping up in curious voices. What do you mean? What is the matter, dear Cat?

Frances said, "I told Mr. Montclair the Elder everything."

A lie, of course. Helen knew that Frances would not share even a sip of water with any of their teachers, no matter how much she loathed Catherine. But Catherine did not know Frances; all their years together, moving in circles of high society, had not provided even that much. Or perhaps the two of them simply did not try to understand each other, Helen thought, and she was fascinated, in spite of herself, watching the horror and the fear move across Catherine's face. It was a tableau that Helen had seen before, with the young lady in her father's parish. That young lady had drowned under the weight of her own shame, but Catherine Walton did not drown.

She lunged at Frances.

The other girls shrieked. Helen startled. It all moved so quickly that her eye could barely follow the transformation from shocked stillness to outright fury. Catherine had thrown herself at Frances, and they had gone down to the grass together, fallen and tumbled there, Catherine spitting at Frances and trying to claw her face. The violence of it made them seem like Red Country animals, Frances so dark and Catherine so fair, nails and teeth and skin. Frances did not suffer Catherine's blows but struck back in her own right — she who wielded Executioner in another land. Catherine's lip split, and drops of blood fell onto the lawn like strawberries.

Then Helen saw Frances tear herself away from Catherine's grasp and crawl to the circle of younger girls and their sewing instruments. She saw Frances grab Catherine's stray needle, still bound with red thread, and the sight of it shocked Helen into action.

She snagged Frances by the shoulders and hauled her aside. Frances hissed and kicked, and then Catherine came for them again, pushing both Helen and Frances into the grass. Frances managed a fist full of Catherine's hair as she went down, causing Catherine to shriek in pain and bend forward like a broken match.

"Stop this!" Helen shouted. "I am Head Girl, and you will listen to me! Stop this!"

"This does not concern you," Frances snarled, trying to push her aside. Helen held onto her more tightly, locking her in the cage of her arms, but Frances moved this way and that until finally Helen's arms roared in pain. She let go. Frances jumped to her feet, and went for a still-smarting
Catherine — it was only the sight of the teachers running across the lawn, and Mr. Montclair the Elder among them, that made her stop.

Mr. Montclair the Elder, tall and stern in his headmaster black. Mrs. Henley and Miss Travers accompanied him, all three of them out of breath. Mr. Montclair the Elder took in the scene, his moustache quivering with sweat, and Helen knew what this must have appeared to be: Frances and Catherine with their bleeding faces and torn skirts, dirt under their fingernails, avarice in their bones.

"What is the meaning of this?" their headmaster barked.

"I caught Miss Leviathan writing a filthy letter," Catherine began, and Helen closed her eyes in despair.

"It does not matter," Frances said, her voice like empty teacups. "Whatever Mr. Montclair shall decide to be my punishment. It does not matter. Tonight we slay the Jabberwock."

Helen did not speak. She no longer trusted herself to say anything that would not end in tears and anger. If only Frances knew some small measure of self-control! If only she had not acted that way with Catherine! In her mind she cursed both her friend and Catherine Walton, and Mr. Montclair for not understanding Catherine's ploy. Why anybody would believe Frances Leviathan of writing love letters was preposterous — Frances was least suited to sentiment of all the girls at school. But Mr. Montclair the Elder did not know this, and Mr. Montclair the Younger had turned red and mottled, his silence a guilty affirmation.

"You do not understand," Helen said tightly. "They shall make you leave the school. It happened the year we came here. Do you remember Julia Whitby? She was caught with a boy from town, and she was sent packing. This is a teacher in your case! That is ten times worse."

"I can't say leaving the school is entirely unappealing," Frances said. She opened the passageway that led them out of the manor. She walked out without a care in the world. Helen hesitated, but in the end there was no indecision at all. She followed her.

The trees at the chessboard crossroads were turning black. Their leaves became coal and crumbled to the ground. A chill evening wind blew through the lattice of branches. They went to their cottage first, where Helen slipped Tweedledum in her pocket. "Is it to be tonight?" she asked. The Red Queen has madness stirring in her blood, Tweedledum replied. The Jabberwock knows you are coming. Yes. It will be tonight.

Helen picked up the vorpal sword from her desk and felt its shimmering weight between her palms.

The end, she thought. But it seemed so unfair, as if they had barely even begun.

Frances was waiting for her by the cottage door, an almost invisible shadow in the darkness. She had Executioner slung over her shoulder, and was wearing a dress of deepest maroon, with black lace that traveled up her throat. "Are you ready?" she asked, and then she flashed a smile. "They say we are the Queens of Wonderland. Well then, shall we make some mischief?"

No, Helen wanted to say. She was tired of mischief. However, she allowed herself a single nod.
for her eager friend, and Frances laughed merrily, perhaps too merrily, as she led the way from the cottage back to the chessboard, and then to the tree with the single tag that read: *The Madlands* in copper lettering. Frances wrapped her fist around the wooden tag, her nails digging into the grooves. Then she pulled, and they felt the grass tilt beneath their feet.

It was not night-time in the Madlands, but rather the streaked and bloody hour of sunset, where the shadows were as long as spears. Helen felt dizzy with the pressure of the air against her lungs. It was hard to breathe, and there was a thick, unpleasant scent in her nose, like sulfur or some other such chemical. It made her head spin, and she took a deep, shaky breath, trying to reorient herself, while the sharp-toothed rock valleys rose up all around her.

There was no living thing in the Madlands, only stones and mountains bathed in colours of war. There was no water, and in their place were empty seas, great wide pits dug into the ground and filled with limestone and shale. Quarries, Helen thought. They were quarries, and in a distant quarry, larger than all the others put together, they could see one gigantic shadow rearing its head above the rocks. It was a monstrous head, poppy red with skin half-shedding from its skull. The Jabberwock opened its mouth to show its blackened teeth, and then it made a sound like a roar, which plunged Helen back into the cold sea. She fumbled for the vorpal sword.

Frances noticed. "Are you frightened?" she asked softly.

Helen had no use for pride, not now when everything was in ruins. "Yes," she said.

"So am I," Frances confessed. She reached out her hand. Helen took it, and they squeezed each other's fingers, staring out over the blistered land and into the eyes of the Jabberwock, who was gnawing on the carcass of a dead swan, its white feathers bleeding all over the monster's mouth.

Helen took another breath. "No use in dallying," she said.

"Yes, Miss Dunn," Frances said. She let go of Helen's hand and began jumping through the rocky islands that jutted out of the quarries, breaking a slow but inexorable path towards the waiting Jabberwock. Her skirts flew around her ankles as she leaped and hopped. Helen followed her, and when she looked down, she glimpsed fire.

She could not say how long it took to reach the monster, only that when they did, the Jabberwock moved towards them as quick as a hissing kettle. Helen cried out in warning, but Frances leaped aside, supernaturally fast, dodging the Jabberwock's poisonous serpentine tongue. Here, in the Red Country, they could do anything, and Frances seemed to float when she jumped, held aloft by Shakespearean spirits, by Ariel in his mercy. They were more than queens in Wonderland: they were magicians.

The scent of sulfur and decay filled Helen's lungs. She watched as Frances leaped from stone pillar to stone pillar, taunting the Jabberwock. When the monster finally drew close with its head rather than its tongue, Frances swung Executioner. The blade met the Jabberwock's neck, but the Jabberwock's skin was like stone. The axe drew no blood, and made no dent.

"You are nothing!" Frances said harshly, trying again. "You are nothing, nothing, nothing! I have lived among murderers and Helen among churchmen! You think you frighten us?"

The Jabberwock lunged for her. Frances leaped aside. She shouted Helen's name. Helen stirred and made her own leap — the air caught her and swirled her towards the Jabberwock, where she wielded the vorpal sword in time to snip off a piece of dried skin hanging from its jaws. Unlike Executioner, the sword breached the monster's body. She was not as quick as Frances, however, and by the time she leaped back to a safe distance, the Jabberwock was upon her.
Her chest seized in fear, but now was not the time to be prideful or weak. She swung her sword, and the Jabberwock reared backwards. She swung it again, and the Jabberwock's eyes went from silver to gold, its tongue lashing out, searing a hot burn into Helen's arm. She cried out, and then she spun, taking off the tip of the Jabberwock's tongue.

Frances attacked from behind, battering at the Jabberwock, grabbing its attention so that Helen could plan her next attack. While the Jabberwock batted at Executioner, Helen brought the vorpal sword down into its neck. The blow was deep, and they watched as the neck half split from top to bottom, exposing bone and muscle.

The Jabberwock screamed.

"Do you see?" Frances cried in delight. "Do you see?"

She spoke too soon. In her distracted state, she did not notice the Jabberwock's claw swinging towards her. Then it made contact, and the air was no longer so kind to the Red Queen. Her knees crumpled, and the force of the blow sent her toppling from her pillar, smashing into the pillar across from it, her back making a violinist's arc, losing all of its bones.

Helen went cold.

She watched in terrible certainty, the way Frances' head hit the ground.

Helen went cold.

The Jabberwock licked its teeth and turned to her, its bloody mouth a slash of animal amusement. It did not speak. Or if it did speak, it spoke in the language of beasts, in the language of smoke and hunt, in the language of dead prey that littered the rocky ground, of which Frances was now one. Helen stared in frozen grief, and only when she saw Frances stir did the coldness dissipate.

The Jabberwock went for her.

Helen discovered how quickly she could move. She discovered how far her legs could bring her, how much her will could carry her. The Jabberwock, howling and hissing, its broken tongue a tendril of fire — and Helen dodged all of its blows in succession, her hair flying sweaty around her cheeks, her arm bleeding and covered in boils from the monster's poison. Frances tried to sit up, but Helen saw that she could not quite manage it, and her elbows collapsed her in a heap.

Then Helen herself landed on the wrong foot, and her ankle twisted. She lost her balance, toppling towards the Jabberwock instead of away.

The monster grinned.

"No!" she heard Frances bellow. "Look over here! Look over here!" The sound of Frances' voice cut through the air, and the Jabberwock did look.

Helen scrambled to her feet.

Frances was crawling on the ground. "You want me!" she said. "Not her! Her blood is so very English and bland." As if in enticement, she coughed out blood, and it dripped down her chin.

"Don't listen to her!" Helen shouted. "You want me!"

"I am weak!" Frances cried. "Look at me! You can finish me right here and now!"

"Don't you dare!" Helen said.
The Jabberwock turned away from her. It began moving towards Frances. Helen screamed out: "I wield the only weapon that can kill you!"

The Jabberwock stopped.

"You are not a true swordsman!" Frances said.

*I will learn*, Helen thought. It was what she did at school, after all. Every day, and for the rest of her life — her life parceled out in a succession of lessons. What good was all this learning, if she could not use it to slay monsters? The vorpal sword, which had been cold in her hands until now, became warm. She felt it tingle between her sweaty palms. She remembered what the Caterpillar had told her, his words a poem spun into the threads of her plain wool skirt. Plain, people called her when they were being compassionate, and plain yet again.

Not so inside her mind. She could see it in her inner eye, what she fought for: a garden with slopes of flowers, and Frances sitting at their cottage table, eating gingerbread and drinking lemonade, laughing. She held the images within her, as firm and precise as a compass pointing north.

The most dangerous of all the countries: love.

It was not a queen who moved against the Jabberwock. There was no crown and there were no thrones. It was only a girl, with firelight in her hair and over her scars, and a sword as light as spun candy in her hands. Helen had always been taught that she could not make or remake the world — she must only settle into her own place within it. This was a lie, as it turned out, and it was a lie when Helen spun on her heel, the vorpal sword a blurring windmill as she lashed out, dicing the Jabberwock's teeth from its gums.

The air was shrieking in her ears, her vision turning white and muted. She no longer saw the sunset, or the rocks, or even the monster. She saw instead, a desk in a classroom and a lesson in chalk, and she was made furious, utterly furious, by it. She slashed with her sword, and when that was not enough, she slashed again, breaking limbs and bodies until the Jabberwock roared in pain. She saw it again, as it was: large and dangerous, carrying entire continents inside its bulging stomach.

What was she?

A girl — only a girl.

*It is enough*, she thought.

And when the Jabberwock was overcome by its falling teeth and skin and tongue, Helen leaped into the air and brought her sword down with all her might, sending it cleaving into the Jabberwock's skull where it split flesh and bone. *Snicker-snack* went the vorpal sword, aiming straight and true. Helen landed on a jutting rock, and she did not give her enemy time to recover. She executed a second blow, a perfect semi-circle cut that she had seen once in a dream that was not a dream.

This was what they would write in the storybooks, those who came after: that there, in the dying sunlight and the hollows of ancient stone, Helen Dunn of Northumberland, Head Girl at Montclair, beheaded the Jabberwock.

When she saw that it was dead, she dropped the vorpal sword and went running. She raced for Frances, who had managed to haul herself against a rock. Frances flung her arms around her, and Helen buried her face in her friend's neck, trembling now in a way that she had not trembled earlier, not even when she was afraid. "Oh!" Frances kept saying, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" Then her voice
turned quiet and hushed. Helen finally twisted from her arms to see what Frances was staring at so intently.

The animals were stepping out of the shadows. She had not noticed them earlier, but they appeared as if they had been waiting the entire time. The White Rabbit was there, as was the Cheshire Cat, as was the Caterpillar. Tweedledum shook in her pocket, and she could feel Tweedledee move in Frances’. There were animals too that she had never seen before, animals of sea and of air, of ground and of cave. They stepped towards them, and they fell to their knees. They lowered their heads, they bent their necks.

One by one, they bowed.

ACT III
LOOKING-GLASS LIES

On April 17 1860, Frances Leviathan was expelled from the Montclair School for Girls on accounts of lecherous behaviour and improper conduct.

Helen did not let her go without a fuss. Together with Miss Travers and Miss Brodie, she appealed Frances’ case, explaining that the love letters to Mr. Montclair the Younger had not been sent from Frances at all, and that Frances was innocent of all wrong-doing. When Mr. Montclair the Elder asked who indeed had composed the letters, Helen hesitated, for she knew Catherine Walton's station was far above her own. However, she gave Catherine's name, and the headmaster seemed impossibly disappointed.

"I had not thought you to be so ill-mannered, Miss Dunn," he said. "The Walton family are great benefactors of this institution."

"I realize that, sir," Helen replied. "But that does not excuse Miss Walton from immoral behaviour."

"Immoral behaviour!" Mr. Montclair the Elder said, his lip trembling beneath his moustache. "Do you expect me to believe that, or do you expect me to see the evidence under my very eyes, which is that Miss Leviathan has been acting wantonly and inappropriately from the day she set foot in these halls!"

So the battle was lost before it was even fought. It did not matter that she was Head Girl and had earned his respect in years prior. Indeed, that she had dined with his family in their private rooms many a time on account of her elevated position at the school. It did not matter that Miss Travers and Miss Brodie supported her, and that both of them were willing to testify on Frances’ behalf. It did not matter, none of it at all, for she could not touch Catherine Walton. In the Red Country the
animals might have knelt for her, but in the real world no one would.

A letter was dispatched to Viscount Esterbrook, though it was common knowledge that he was living in exile on the Continent. His solicitors were summoned instead, two somber men in black, whose coach pulled up at the school on a rainy day. Frances and Helen watched them approach from an upper story window, and Helen felt as if she might never breathe properly again.

"You must dress warmly," she instructed. "The weather is dreary today."

Frances' hair was a tumble about her shoulders; she had not even bothered to comb it this morning. She wore a heavy riding dress, overlaid by a cloak that fastened with a brooch. She had packed all of her clothes into a valise and two trunks, which waited by the door like tombstones. They were in the girls' dormitories, but they had no other company, for the other girls were preoccupied with their lessons. Miss Travers had allowed Helen dismissal from hers so that she could see Frances off; Helen was grateful.

Frances cast an emotionless eye over the sight of her father's solicitors in the rain. "I am not going with them," she said.

"Oh?" Helen asked, more sharply than she meant. "Where do you plan to go then?"

"To town," Frances said. "To Stratford." She picked up her valise. "This is all that I need. The rest is dross."

"You cannot be serious," Helen replied. "What would you have in Stratford? Where would you live? What would you eat? I realize that returning to your father's estate cannot be pleasant, but at least you will be taken care of there!"

"There I shall rot," Frances retorted. "I will live in my cage, and I will preen my feathers, and I will walk past the room where my mother died and I shall... I shall go mad." She licked her dry lips. "I mean it. I shall go mad. I would not survive it."

Helen swallowed. "That is spoiled chatter. You will be surrounded by comforts. There are those who would chew off her own arm for that."

"Then let them have it instead of me!" Frances cried.

There was a knock on the door. "The solicitors are here to take you home," Miss Brodie said quietly.

"Yes, yes, we are coming!" Frances shouted back. They heard Miss Brodie's footsteps retreat, and Frances curled her fingers into fists, biting down on her own skin. "I had a taste of freedom in the Red Country," she said, sounding like she was strangling on her own phlegm. "It was glorious! It was everything I had ever wanted! To live by my own merits, free from the sins of others — to live by my own making. Men are granted that privilege, damn them, and we are not. Damn them!"

She swirled around. Helen grabbed at her sleeve.

"At least tell me you have somewhere to stay," she pleaded.

"Do you know Miss Carson and Miss Anderson? The spinsters?" Frances said.

"Yes," Helen said.

"They are friends of my sister, from when Miss Anderson used to live in London. She now runs
the Three Candles Inn with her brother. She will let me have a room there." Frances let out a tremulous breath. "I do have some funds, saved up over the years for an event such as this. I can last for quite a few months."

"And when those few months are over?" Helen demanded. It unnerved her to know that Frances had been her own private Wellington, strategizing a defense to her demise. It spoke of an inevitability that Helen did not want to believe was true.

"Why, I suppose I shall have to find work," Frances said. Her smile had a bitter, coppery edge. "I hear it is good for the soul. I would make quite the charming laundress, no?" She tugged her arm away from Helen, not without some difficulty. "Let me go. I have paid a cook to hold the back passage open for me and create a distraction. She will not wait long." No sooner than she had pried herself from Helen's grasp did she lean in again, wrapping her arm around Helen's neck and pulling her close. She kissed Helen's hair and then her forehead. Her eyes glittered with tears.

"I am sorry to leave you," she said. "You fought for me, I know, and now they will make you pay dearly for it. But this is your kingdom. This is where you belong. You must promise to visit me, however. On Sundays, you must come to town and see me."

"I will," Helen promised thickly. It was inconceivable that she would not. "In the meantime, what shall I do about Catherine Walton?" She ached for a vorpal sword, for a quick, clean solution. Instead, she felt her own helplessness like a physical ache, her knees and joints locked together in a paroxysm of guilt. Frances' kiss was a ghostly pressure, too quick and too fleeting.

"Who cares about Catherine Walton?" Frances said. She picked up her valise. "Off with her head." With those parting words, she was striding out of the door, and out of sight; she was but a small, solitary figure, walking the way between worlds.

They said a person could only live the one life as appointed by God, but from that day forward, Helen felt as if she were living two.

The first was Montclair, the life she had known, and which she now pantomimed like Pepper's Ghost, like a magic trick. Her performance consisted of walking through a peninsula of walls and briar bushes and younger girls who all scrambled for her attention. There seemed to be a thousand things to do in a single day, as spring began to melt into summer and another academic year drew to a close. There were fears to soothe, teachers to play liaison with, missing skirts and torn shoes to peer carefully over; Helen spent nearly an entire day holding one of the first-year girls' dolls, promising dutifully to make sure no harm came to it, until Mrs. Henley saw her and rebuked her for indulging ridiculous fantasies.

"Is this a factory?" she asked sharply. "Instead of grooming young ladies, are we here to make children?"

For all of Helen's dislike of Mrs. Henley, she had always managed a veneer of politeness and respect, for the woman was the headmaster's sister and it would never do to cross her. She felt changed, however, now that Frances was gone, emboldened by her friend's bravery. She cast a cool eye at Mrs. Henley, who startled.

Mrs. Henley opened her mouth.
And then she closed it, as Helen continued to stare at her chillingly.

"Go to the kitchens," Mrs. Henley finally snapped. "I believe one of the cooks was searching for you earlier."

Helen picked up her skirts and the doll, and was all too pleased to leave.

Her second life seemed smaller, tucked inside a single room on the second floor of the Three Candles Inn; Frances' room, which she had rented from Miss Anderson and her brother. Helen had promised to visit on Sundays, and she did, sneaking away from her duties with a mixture of excitement and guilt. Only she and Stratford's spinsters knew where Frances Leviathan now resided. It was a secret that fluttered against her ribcage. There had been a great uproar when the viscount's solicitors had discovered Frances missing, and threats that the viscount would see the school punished for its carelessness in losing one of its pupils. It was an idle threat, however. If Viscount Esterbrook could be stirred into caring about his daughter, that would have been the greatest surprise of the century.

The solicitors had left fuming and twitching, and Helen made excuses to visit town on Sundays — but found herself squirreling away to visit on other days as well. Their previous endeavours to play the Red Country game in the woods proved useful now, granting Helen experience in using servants' staircases and navigating timed strategies so that she could creep about undetected.

When she arrived at the Three Candles Inn, Frances would be waiting for her. Frances' face every time Helen stepped through the door made her blood run wild and hot, for there was such open joy, as if Frances had not truly believed Helen would make the effort.

Time was their most precious resource, but they had more of it then they would have expected when Frances said to Helen, "We can enter the Red Country from here too. We do not have to use the woods."

Here meant an alley behind the Three Candles Inn, where chicken bones threw striped shadows over their shoes, and the air smelled of curdled milk and human piss. Frances showed Helen what she had discovered, which was that if one were to squeeze between the crack that separated the inn's northeast wall from the building beside it — that of a tanner's —, one would emerge on the other side in the Red Country. The crack was not large, but it just the right size for two seventeen-year-old girls.

Helen was astonished. "Do you think these gateways are everywhere?"

"Not everywhere," Frances replied. "Do you recall what Tweedledum told us? There are three gates in England, he said. I believe that the gate in Stratford must be the largest. I believe that this is the same rip, for a lack of a better word, that we found in the woods. Only it extends here as well."

"I remember now," Helen said. "The gate in London is inside a clockmaker's shop, and there is another gate in another place, in a graveyard. Those seem like very small rips."

"Ah, but this is the birthplace of Shakespeare," Frances said with a slight smile. "It is the birthplace of Puck and the fairies. We must make allowances for that."

Hence the Red Country became the language of Helen's second life, the secret life she shared with Frances. As time passed differently in the Red Country, they could spend hours together, which was not a luxury they might have otherwise had in the real world. For that Helen gave thanks for the drawing out of time, for the slow golden days that marked their time as queens — for queens they were, queens of an endless summer that turned the leaves a lush green, jewelled with flowers.
and fruit.

A queen needs must have a court, and in the Red Country they began building theirs. Two new trees, as white as snow, appeared on the chessboard, one called The Court of the Red and the other The Court of the White. Privately Helen was disappointed that there was no court for both the red and the white together, as there once was, but Frances expressed no desire to go north and live in the Palace of the Red and the White. A ghost's domain, she called it. The animals seemed to agree with her, saying that the two queens deserved their own palaces, though they joined together to rule the kingdom and no one dared say that one queen was more powerful than the other.

It did not seem that they built their courts, but rather that the Red Country built it for them, flourishing in the corners of their own imagination. Helen would stand in the green fields and gardens that were denoted her land. She would think about white marble and libraries that would make Alexandria weep in envy. She would think about stone lions prowling with fierce loyalty, and sprigs of white flowers underneath the sparse moonlight.

She would leave, and when she returned a few days later, the territory would have stirred. Walls would begin to appear, and white blossoms curled beneath her steps, their buds tight and young, a promise.

Animals came to pay tribute to the White Queen. Helen watched as badgers dug holes into the lavender-speckled hills, and rabbits left offerings of berries and diamonds in her coffers. It was a strange sensation, and she felt it was unnecessary most of the time. What use did she have for jewels, even in a fairy kingdom? It was not as if she planned to wear them, or to indulge in extravagance beyond her worldly library. But these too were the signs and symbols of her position, and Frances encouraged her to say nothing of it.

"You cannot reject their tribute," she said. "It would break their hearts."

So said the Queen of Hearts.

At night sometimes, when she perched on the rising walls of her soon-to-be-palace, reading a book by lantern, she could see the shapes of the animals on the hills. She could hear them rouse and sing amongst themselves, and as the sultry summer wind blew through the valleys, they called her the Sword Queen, the Vorpal Queen, the Lady Who Did Not Stand Down.

They brought her the Jabberwock's head, perfectly preserved in brine, and after deliberation, Helen gave in and nailed it to her wall.

If Helen's court brought to mind the white serenity of classical Grecian temples and symposiums, Frances' court was lush and opulent, the way an Englishwoman would imagine a Turkish bazaar to be. Smoke and spicy scents misted through the warm stone walls, which were shades of red and umber, every now and then a decisive smear of black, deep colours meant to impress as well as intimidate.

Helen had not imagined herself a throne, but Frances did. It was a throne made of thorns and roses, though when Helen looked at it, she saw blood. It was a beautiful throne to be sure, like something out of a Grimm fairy tale, but there was a viciousness to its edges that served to remind those who gazed upon it that Helen was the benevolent queen, and Frances was not. Frances was
creative and fierce and she understood the Red Country in ways that Helen could never hope to imitate, understood its wildness as if it was her birthright, whereas there were still portions of the land that made Helen frown at its lack of civilization.

The animals felt a keen kinship with the Red Queen. That much was undeniable. They came to Helen for grace and wisdom, seeking the answers to their problems. But they went to Frances for understanding.

"The Red Country cannot be civilized," Frances explained when Helen visited her court, and they shared ambrosia over a tray of sugared candies. "It can be united and it can be ruled, but its very bones are feral. That is its power." She licked the sugar off her lips. "When I say that I understand it, that isn't true. I understand it more than you do, because you are ever the paragon of polite society, but no one can fully understand these lands."

"I don't see why we cannot try," Helen replied. "I mean to undertake a proper cartographic survey of the country. If we cannot understand the country's magic, we can at least have a decent map of it, so we know which way is up and which way is down."

"By all means, try," Frances said. "My honest opinion? I am not sure your map would of any use."

"Well," Helen frowned.

"Yes, exactly! If you did not insist on creating one anyway," Frances continued, "I would accuse you of being an impostor and not my true Helen at all." She threw her head back and laughed. "Tell me, how are they treating you at that dreadful prison we called a school?"

"I would not call it a prison. It is not so bad as that."

Frances raised her eyebrows. "They expelled me."

"A stupid decision," Helen said vehemently. She softened. "The school is run by hardheaded misers. But I mean to say that the daily living is not so bad. I rarely have dealings with either of the Mr. Montclairs, and I usually manage to avoid Mrs. Henley. When you do that, life becomes ordinary. There are worse schools."

Frances stared at her in amusement. "This is why the animals call you the Just," she said.

"It is the truth," Helen said. "At other schools, schools where the girls are not so well-off, girls are beaten and starved and treated worse than we were. I no longer have any love for Montclair, not after you left. But I will not call it a demon's den either."

"I would rather not call it anything at all," Frances said. "I would rather never think of it again. That part of my life is finished."

"Then we shall speak no more of it," Helen promised, and Frances bestowed her a smile that made the roses bloom. However, Helen saw shadows beneath her eyes, dark smudges that stood out all the more vividly in this self-made paradise.

Helen considered methods to bring the subject to the forefront. To honestly ask how Frances was faring, alone in the world without Helen to help her as she so often did at Montclair. Which was not to say that Helen had any superior feelings, believing anyone to be bereft if they did not spend most of their time with her. But Frances was an aristocrat, and though she seemed to be surviving in her room at the Three Candles Inn, surviving was not the same as thriving, not when her hands began to show calluses and her eyes were the dark, uneasy shade of soot.
"Are you—" Helen began.

"Hatter!" Frances interrupted. "So you have come to grace us with your presence!"

Helen turned to see a tall, gangly figure approach the breakfast table. She could not tell if it was a man or a beast. He seemed a combination of both, with a shifting face and a crooked smile, and a green chequered blouse with all the trappings of a dandy. "Your Majesties," he said, sweeping a bow while removing his hat, a truly marvelous contraption of clockwork and silk. "I bid you good morning."

"You have not been properly introduced to the White Queen yet, have you?" Frances asked impatiently.

"I am afraid I have not had that pleasure," the Hatter acknowledged. "I mean to present myself at the White Court shortly, but time, ah time! More precious than beetles, and just as hard to find when you drop them all over the floor."

He carried a hatbox under his arm.

"Is that my commission?" Frances asked, pleased.

"Indeed it is, Your Dread Majesty!"

"Bring it forward then," she said, and the Hatter advanced. He had feverish eyes, Helen observed. Though she was irritated that he had halted her plans to share a private breakfast with Frances, she gave him a small smile. He grinned back.

"You are right," he told Frances. "She is beautiful."

"Please," Helen said sharply.

"She is," Frances agreed. "You should have seen her fight the Jabberwock! With all the glory of angels."

"Afterwards, I hobbled for days," Helen said. "Hardly angelic."

Frances waved her hand to dismiss the notion. The Hatter opened the box, and Frances transitioned from waving to clapping her hands together in delight. "Oh, this is beyond lovely!" she said, lifting the hat from its nest of tissues. If they were speaking of wildness earlier, they were looking upon its very specimen now, this hat with its tangle of ribbons and lace, uncompromising over a stretched, tight fabric a shade of red that Helen was certain was familiar.

"Made from the skin of the Jabberwock," the Hatter confirmed.

Helen winced.

"Wonderful," Frances declared. She put the hat on and modeled it, affecting the look of a smoldering Italian beauty — she did not have to try very hard. "Helen may keep its head, but now I shall have a head all of my own."

"The height of true fashion," Helen said dryly.

"You are so provincial, I cannot rely on you for anything," Frances giggled. "You must forgive the White Queen," she informed the Hatter. "She thinks a pair of new stockings is the epitome of style."
He eyed Helen, who had come for breakfast in a plain blue dress with white embroidery. "If Your Majesty would allow me to—"

"No thank you," Helen said.

"It is difficult to adjust to new things," the Hatter said diplomatically. "Some would say impossible even."

Helen, who suffered a temporary fit of annoyance over the way Frances was dismissing her, said, "On the contrary, my dear sir. You will find me perfectly amenable to adjusting, as long as the endeavour is worthwhile. If it is, then I can quite easily believe six impossible things before breakfast."

"Six!" he said. "Why not seven?"

Frances had picked up a hand-mirror and was now admiring herself from every angle.

"Your vanity!" Helen said in exasperation.

"Helen," Frances said, "in the world we come from, I am living in a room that smells of filth, and every night I am kept awake by the sounds of drinking and brawling. Men grope me on the stairway when I come down for meals, and I used to have trunks of dresses but now I only have three. You will indulge me, please."

Helen bit the inside of her mouth in shame. "Yes, of course," she said.

He began making appearances to all of their tea parties, the Hatter, and Helen could not think of a good reason to protest.

Untrue, she thought sternly. One must be honest in one's own mind. She could think of many reasons to protest, but all of them were petty. Now that she and Frances were queens, they no longer belonged to each other. Of course they had to make time for their people, and time could not be neatly allotted into the afternoons when they held open court in their palaces – alternating between the Court of the Red and the Court of the White. A queen did not have a private life, and Helen found this to be true for herself as well; demands were made on her time and attention, rarely maliciously, but it detracted from her plans nonetheless.

In part, she was used to this. Being Head Girl at Montclair was much the same experience. She could yearn to rest her feet at night and read by candlelight, but just as often she would be interrupted by some trifle that demanded looking into; an argument between girls or a spilled saucer of milk left out for the cats. Frances used to complain that she rarely had Helen for herself, and Helen did not want to give her the satisfaction of having the tables reversed.

Never mind that the Hatter brought no real matter of political importance with him. When he arrived at the queens' tea, he did not inspire discussions on jurisprudence or taxation. He never gave cause for them to discuss Locke or Rousseau or Plato's notions of good leadership. For Frances, he was not a subject; he was a friend.

_I must be the most selfish person alive, to resent her a friend_, Helen thought, for she had had friends at school. Fewer and fewer ever since she was named Head Girl, and fewer still when she began devoting most of her time to Frances. But there were girls with whom she enjoyed the
occasional bout of companionship, such as Dolores Kember, who also loved to read and whose father was a Cambridge professor.

Frances had no one.

Frances was not entirely blameless for her solitary state. Helen would never dream of saying so. To be sure, there was great prejudice against Frances for her father's crimes and her sister's profession and the social ruin of her household. Girls such as Catherine Walton made it clear that Frances was not welcome in their circles, and even the teachers did not seem eager to have Frances in their classes. However, not all of the students and teachers at Montclair had been such snobs. Dolores Kember and Miss Travers were two perfectly good examples; they had tried to befriend Frances, each of them, only to be swatted aside as swiftly as a mosquito.

Thus to see her as the Red Queen, laughing and sharing tea with the Hatter – when she did not laugh for anyone but Helen – was a strange sight, unsettling as if the world had tilted slightly on its axis.

"You seem different," Helen observed one day, while the Hatter had excused himself briefly to fetch yet another one of his creations, which he claimed to have forgotten at the door.

Frances sipped her raspberry tea. "Do I seem happier? Is that what you mean to say?"

"It was not," Helen said.

"Oh?"

"You seem... brighter." Helen chose her words carefully. "You are more open as queen. You laugh more often. But that does not equal happiness."

"I do not know what happiness is," Frances said. She looked into the depths of her teacup, as if divining her own fortune. What she found there, she did not say.

"Happiness," declared the Hatter, returning with a flourish, "is that squirmy feeling you get in your belly when the day is sweet and you are full of treats."

Frances' dark eyes sparkled. "I should name you the royal lexicographer. You could write me a dictionary, just as Samuel Johnson did, but yours will not be nearly so boring."

"I would do anything to please you, Your Majesty," he said, and Helen hated the sight of him, with his peacock plumage and his horsey teeth. What made him particularly disturbing, she decided, was that he seemed to possess no history. There was no mention of him in the archives of the country, and he dressed to match, reinventing himself day by day. Today he wore a soldier's uniform; yesterday he had dressed himself in a gown with a bustle.

"If that is happiness, then what is sadness?" Frances asked.

"Sadness," he said, "is the feeling you get when the fish are dying in the pond and you do not have your breakfast."

"Ha!" said Frances.

"And love?" Helen asked.

The Hatter gazed at her. Helen could smell his sweat, which carried the fragrance of oranges. "Love," he said, "is when you go too far and not far enough. It is when you travel to new lands, and every sea you swim in feels like home."
"How poetic of you," Frances drawled.

"You do not believe in love, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"I believe in endings," she said. "Which means that at some point I must believe in beginnings as well, like a matched set of bookends – but for the most part, love is easily interchangeable with brain fever." She raised her teacup to her mouth. "My parents were very much in love, you see. My mother used to tell me, when I was young, that when she met my father in Florence, he swept her off her feet. She would say this as she combed my hair. She would tell me I looked just like him, and he was her dearest love."

"She was Italian," the Hatter said. "We must excuse some degree of brain fever."

"Pardon?" Frances asked sharply. "What are you saying about my mother?"

The Hatter was taken aback. The Red Queen had yet to rebuke even his most extravagant remarks. "Nothing!" he said. "I meant nothing by it. See here, your new hat!"

Helen waited to see how Frances would react. Frances surprised her by changing the subject. "Yes, it is a wonderful hat," she said, distracted. "But I am not thinking about hats right now. I am thinking about gates."

"One could wear a gate on one's head," the Hatter mused. "However, it would be very heavy."

"I am thinking of ways we could travel between our world and the Red Country, beyond what is already available," Frances said. "I am thinking... what if we were to create our own gates? What if, instead of relying on cracks and forests, we could travel as we pleased?"

"There is mention of such a thing," Helen spoke.

"What?" Frances turned to her. "Why did you not tell me earlier?"

"I did not know you were thinking of it," Helen said patiently. "The gates in Stratford have sufficed for us so far. I did not think there was a need for more."

"Of course there is a need for more," Frances said. "We are queens. We should not have to scurry about, waiting for doors to open. We should be able to open doors whenever we wish." She leaned forward. "Where did you read this? In a book? What did it say?"

"The White Rabbit brought me a trunk full of old books," Helen explained. "There were many monographs on the history of the Red Country, most of them dubious and not of particular historical vigour. But there was one book that mentioned the rule of the old queens, the ones who vanished." She rubbed at her nose, trying to remember the exact details. "I believe it said that one of the queens had a looking-glass, and through this looking-glass she could travel to any world she wished."

"Does this looking-glass still exist?" Frances asked eagerly.

"I don't think so," Helen said. "I am not sure this story is true either. I am inclined to believe it based on the other works of the author, all of which seem excellently researched. But I do not know. If the looking-glass does still exist, I have never heard it mentioned."

"We should ask the Caterpillar," Frances said.

"Or you could ask me," the Hatter said. They looked at him, and he smiled with his lips pulled back. They were tainted red with rouge. "I have seen the looking-glass of the old queens with
these very eyes. In their palace in the mountains, oh yes! The glass was as thin as a wafer, and it was cold to the touch, and at night, when we were all abed, we could hear it sing."

Frances studied him from behind her long lashes. "Tell me more," she finally said. "You must tell me everything."

"You mean to recreate it? I thought you only favoured endings, not beginnings," Helen said waspishly.

But Frances was already returning to her tea, saying nothing, her face composed in a portrait of a queen lost in thought. Then, after a brief moment of silence, her lungs seized and she began to cough.

Helen was foolish. She suffered her own loss when they returned from the Red Country to the Three Candles Inn; she had lost track of time.

Morning splintered over the rooftop of the inn, and Helen felt dismay sink into her bones, followed by the acrid bite of fear. Morning, she thought, and at Montclair they would be looking for her – there was no hiding her absence, and why had she not paid more attention to the passage of time? Why had she ended up staying the entire night with Frances, walking through the woods of the Red Country and eating crisp pears while the world outside went on?

She barely even had time to say goodbye. Frances watched in bemusement as she ran out of the alleyway, picking up her skirts and dodging townsfolk, dirtying her shoes as she ran the path from the town to the school.

She could not return using the direct route, or any front door that would draw even more attention to her truancy; she wove around the back and crept through the servants' entrance, though by morning it was no longer so empty, and cooks and maids watched her with knowing eyes. Helen burned with worry, keeping her head ducked. She told herself not to show shame, for betraying such a weakness would mean the loss of the staff's respect, but it was a difficult task.

She ran into Miss Travers on the second floor, and Miss Travers grabbed her arm and pulled her into an empty classroom.

"Where have you been?" Miss Travers asked. "We have been searching for you!"

Helen struggled for breath, panting from physical exertion. "I took a walk," she said, thinking quickly. "I was tired, so I lay down on the lawn by the woods. I must have fallen asleep. I am sorry."

"If you expect me to believe that, you must think I have hog brains," Miss Travers said. She looked at the mud on Helen's shoes. "You went to town."

Helen said nothing.

"Oh my dear girl," Miss Travers sighed. "Tell me it is not because of a boy."

"It is not because of a boy," Helen said.

"I understand the impulse," Miss Travers said. "Dear Lord, I understand! I was young once, and I
had dreams as well. But you must realize that the headmaster is not pleased with you right now, and to draw suspicion to yourself is to invite disaster."

"Of course I understand that," Helen said. "I am not a fool."

"You are giving a good impression of one! You must be careful. If Mr. Montclair – either of them – wanted to, they could make your life very miserable. Never mind that you are graduating soon. They could tell your teachers not to write you any references, and where would you be then?"

Helen felt sick to her stomach.

Miss Travers softened her tone and touched her arm sympathetically. "You have not been the same since Miss Leviathan disappeared. Those recent events trouble me too, and I know she was your dearest friend. But you must not let your loss ruin your judgment. For your own sake." She hesitated. "We shall find Miss Leviathan. I am sure she is all right. She was a poor student, but it was for lack of effort, not ability; she has a rare cunning. It will serve her well, wherever she is."

Perhaps it was Helen's imagination, but Miss Travers looked at her intently when she said the last part, as if she knew that Helen had more knowledge of Frances' disappearance than she was divulging. It was tempting to make a confession. Miss Travers was Helen's most beloved teacher, and she wanted to give her the trust she had earned; but she knew Frances would not like it, and Frances' safety was more important than anything else.

"How badly have I damaged myself today?" Helen asked instead. "Is Mr. Montclair baying for my blood?"

"We shall see," Miss Travers said grimly.

Having fallen asleep by the woods was not the most convincing story Helen had ever told, but she was fortunate; Mr. Montclair the Elder sat her down for a lecture on carelessness and forbade her the evening meal. It was an acceptable punishment. It could have been far worse.

This was the gentle rain before Prospero's tempest. Helen could see it on his face when he berated her. He would practice generosity this time, because of her spotless reputation and her prestige among the girls, but he would not do so again.

_I must not make the same mistake again_, she thought. Returning to the classrooms on an empty stomach, she felt weary and exhausted. The other girls were watching her as if she were a creature they had never quite seen before. Only Catherine Walton seemed unsurprised. She smirked over her desk.

"Even when she is gone, Miss Leviathan encourages torrid behaviour," she said, and Helen struggled not to strike her across the face.

For an entire week, Helen practiced caution. She did not leave the school; she did not visit Frances. Her chest ached with longing, and she found it difficult to keep her attention on her work. She became easily distracted, often moody, even towards kind souls such as Dolores Kember who tried to engage her with conversation. Helen did not have the spirit for it anymore, and soon the other girls left her alone entirely. Even Miss Travers seemed wary about her – Helen felt restlessness like a disease, and it troubled them both deeply.

It was on a Sunday during the school visit to Stratford, that she was able to see Frances again. It would have to be a quick visit, but Helen could no longer stand the distance. She waited until no one was watching, and then she slipped away from the crowd and walked hurriedly to the Three Candles Inn, up the stairs to Frances' room.
She knocked, and when Frances answered the door, Helen blinked.

"You look terrible," she said. Frances had a sickly pallor. Her hair was stringy, her eyes dull. Frances, who was normally quite fastidious about bathing – used to the luxury of servant-drawn baths at home – bore clear and uncharacteristic signs of slovenliness. She did not seem the girl Miss Travers had described, a girl bright and with rare cunning. Her room was filthy, carrying a tinge of an unpleasant smell of human habitation, and when Helen looked down, she witnessed trails of ants following sticky substances on the floorboards.

Frances coughed into her sleeve. "It is nothing," she said.

"You were coughing even last week," Helen said. "You are ill."

"A little bit of illness is not worth fretting over," Frances said, a corkscrew lie. She let Helen into the room and closed the door behind her. Frances sat down on the bed, and then she bit her lip. "You did not visit me."

"I was in trouble at school," Helen said. "I could not risk it."

"Oh, well, it is all right. I occupied myself quite excellently while you were gone," Frances said, tilting her chin defiantly. All the while, her voice shook. Tenderness welled inside Helen's heart, and she sat down beside her friend, dipping low on the cheap mattress, stuffed with rushes. The blankets were scratchy, and there was no pillow for Frances to rest her head on. Helen wanted to cry herself. She held Frances' delicate wrists, feeling the weightlessness of her bones.

"You must take better care of yourself," she urged. "You cannot live inside the Red Country. The food you eat there will not fill your body here. It is fairy food. You will not survive on it."

"I have no money for food," Frances whispered.

"What?" Helen cried. "You said you had some funds saved!"

"Every pence of it goes to rent," Frances said.

"But Miss Anderson—"

"Is kind and wonderful, but her brother who owns the inn is not!" Frances said. She began coughing again, violent rattles that sounded wet and slippery. "He demands payment, so I pay him. There is nothing Miss Anderson can do, other than bring me the occasional leftovers when she can – and she most often cannot. He watches her, you see."

"Then you cannot stay here!" Helen said. "Go back to your father's estate. Whatever pain you felt there, it is not worth starvation."

Frances rested her head on Helen's shoulder. "I am waiting for you. When you graduate and find a job as a governess. I will go wherever you will go. I will be the Ruth to your Naomi."

"Shall we live off my feeble governess pay?" Helen asked scathingly. "Are you losing your wits? Do you know how little a governess makes? I will depend on the generosity of my employers for food and board, and I doubt they will take very kindly to a tagalong with no real skills!"

Frances lifted her head. "Is that so! I shall have to think of a solution even though I am a dullard with no real skills! One thing is for certain. I am never going back. I have nightmares about that house. I see it over and over again, the way he killed her. She was my mother, and he killed her."

Her voice broke on a sob. "You do not know what it is like! You with your happy home and your plain, mild parents! I used to wonder if he would kill me too!"
Helen's throat closed tightly. "He is no longer in England," she managed to push out. "He is in exile. He cannot harm you anymore."

"He is everywhere in that house," Frances said, choking. "His solicitors control my every move. I would rather drink hemlock than return to that."

"No," Helen said abruptly. "Never say that. Do you hear me? Never, ever say that again." She stood up and paced the room. "If you are hungry, I will bring you food. I will send you my own allowance. If it comes to it, Catherine Walton has plenty of money, and I know where she keeps it."

Frances rubbed her dirty hands across her face in two desperate sweeps. "We are the Queens of Wonderland. We should be above this ugly existence." She grabbed at Helen's hand and held it tightly, imploringly. "Let us return. Right now. The Hatter is waiting for us. Let us pretend that none of this exists."

"Pretending none of this exists will only create more problems," Helen replied, but Frances' grip on her was surprisingly strong despite her illness. She began to drag Helen out of the room and down the stairs, stumbling blindly towards glory.

If she could not hold sway over Frances, Helen exerted her power where she could: she considered the fate of the vorpal sword.

"I cannot keep it, surely," she said to Tweedledum, carrying him in the pockets of her skirts. They moved through the elegant halls of her palace, which grew even as they spoke. New walls spread out like the wings of swans, and towers rose from twisted thickets of ivy. "It is not my sword, after all," Helen said out loud. "I used it to defeat the Jabberwock, but it was the sword that guided my arm, not any power of my own."

But you dove into the maze, Tweedledum responded. You went into the sea.

"It was not so difficult," Helen lied.

So say those who have drowned before you.

"Who can say why I succeeded where others before me failed?" Helen said. She entered a circular chamber, and in the centre of that chamber was an altar, and on that altar was the sword. A mouse-servant was scrubbing the floors until they shone with starlight; she squeaked when she saw the White Queen and her advisor, and after sweeping a curtsy, dashed away.

"I do not think I shall ever grow used to that," Helen stated. "That is what I mean. I do not feel singular or unique. I was the right person at the right time — I do not have nearly one tenth the bond to this country that Frances does. Do you know that roses grow where she walks? Storms pass when she speaks. It is absurd."

Absurd or astonishing? Tweedledum asked.

"Both," Helen sighed. "She has begun to build a mirror that will open a new gate between the two worlds. I daresay she shall even succeed. Whereas I have difficulty in rearranging my own palace. The other day I tried to change the layout of the second floor, and it did not work." She looked at
her pale hands. "I lack the power."

You are the White Queen. You are the empty queen, the palette which has yet to be painted.

"How very flattering," Helen said. She twisted her head away. "I worry about her so much." The words fell out of her mouth like honey cakes, and she could not summon the effort to hide them. "She is not well, where we come from."

Send for physicians.

"What physicians?" Helen asked in frustration. "We could not afford one, and we could not risk one either, unless we want the entire medical profession to know where Viscount Esterbrook's wayward daughter is hiding. They could spread our secret. It is too complicated," she concluded. "It is a chess game played with only pawns."

That may yet be the simplest game of them all, Tweedledum said. I am a creature of Wonderland, made by the first queens. I cannot offer advice on lands in which I have not been. They do not exist for me. But it seems to me that your choice is simple. Either you save her, or you do not.

"What is she doing right now?" Helen asked by way of response.

I will ask my brother Tweedledee, he said. There was a moment's pause, and then he spoke. She is holding a croquet tournament in her gardens. The players are the Hatter, the White Rabbit, the March Hare, the Dormouse, and the Mock Turtle. Currently the Dormouse holds the advantage.

Helen returned her attention to the vorpal sword, and its quiet gleaming steel. "It is not mine," she said at last. "It was never mine, and to keep it is to keep a serpent in my bed." She removed the sword from the altar, feeling its glacier kiss against her bare wrists. She trailed her fingers over its blade and its hilt, expecting to leave smudge marks against the pristine workmanship. There were none. No matter how much she stroked the sword, she left none of herself behind.

She thought of the future, of new queens come to take the place of the old. She left her palace and her court, walking through gardens of courtiers, all of whom bowed when she passed, but she did not speak or acknowledge them. She traveled as far as she could, back to the chessboard where it all began, and then to the tree that was the door to The Maze in the Sea.

She stood on the cliffs above the maze, staring down at the restless churning of the waters below, at the outcrop of mermaid labyrinths. She could see shadows of whales moving through currents that flourished like bloodstains.

She threw the sword in.

The sea swallowed it. The sword sliced through the water, smooth and perfect, the foam frothing a painful blue. Then the vorpal sword was gone, drowned, out of sight.

To the sylphs in the air and the nymphs in the cold, she gave her benedictions. She did not know if God existed in the Red Country, save for the gooseflesh that prickled her arms, a holy spirit moving through her. You have lent me this gift. I now return it to you. My deepest thanks. She did not wait for an answer. She tucked her hair behind her ears, straightened her skirts, and then picked her way down the path that led her ever further from the cliffs.

When she arrived at the croquet game, Frances waved at her. "You are late!" she said. She swung her mallet in whimsical circles while the Mock Turtle struggled to make his shot. The brim of her hat was tilted, her spiderweb veil askew.

"At least I am not the only one," the White Rabbit muttered.
"Ah, Your Majesty!" the Hatter said, strolling forth. "You have such perfect timing. I noticed a package arrive for you not a minute earlier. It is over there!" He waved at a bench, on which, tucked beside the blackberry tarts, there was a parcel in plain brown butcher paper, the size of a sword.

"It smells of salt," he said judiciously.

"Salt?" Frances echoed. "Whatever could it be?"

"I do not like this place. It is filled with ghosts," Helen said, but in the swirl of laughter and the click of balls soaring through brightly painted hoops, no one was listening.

Helen was running. A most undignified choice of transportation for a young lady, but Helen was running, and her heart was beating violent melodies, jumping up and down so fiercely that she could taste sourness in her own throat. She was running down the streets of Stratford, drawing the attention of all the townsfolk, many of whom recognized her. Is that not the Head Girl at Montclair? she could hear them murmur. What is she in such a hurry for? She was running not in the elegant, practiced way that Mrs. Henley had taught them to run if it should ever come to it, but in an ugly, athletic, terror-stricken way, the way one runs for a physician, for a knife, for the end of the world.

Her lungs burned. She gasped for air and wondered why her body could not propel itself faster. She wondered at the limits of human frailty, at why God had designed her in precisely this useless fashion, where her petticoats flapped about her ankles, and Montclair Manor seemed no closer with each passing minute.

She had betrayed herself — she had told herself to be more careful of the time, to mark the passage between the Red Country and her real life, the life which was important, but she had allowed herself to be briefly seduced. And by what, she thought angrily. By yet another one of Frances' hats! Sitting there in the courtyard, watching Frances model it for all her admirers, listening to the Hatter tell another story about journeying in the belly of a giant bear.

Such a small reward for a large sacrifice!

Finally, when it seemed her legs could stand it no further, even though it was the same dash she had made not a few weeks prior, she pulled within sight of the school. She saw it, a sight both precious and dreaded: a coach rattling away, down the path towards her. She ran up towards it, waving her arms. "Stop! Stop!" she shouted. "Mr. Fenton! I am here for my interview! My name is Helen Dunn!"

But the coach did not stop, and the coachman scowled at her. "Move aside, girl!"

"Please!" Helen said, sweat staining her skin. "I am sorry that I am late, but I am here now! Please, Mr. Fenton!"

"Mr. Fenton does not have time to stay," the coachman said. "He has an appointment in London. Now go." He flicked the reins and the horses began trotting. Helen was forced to duck aside, stepping into a pile of mud that squelched around her shoes.

"Please!" she shouted, trying to make the man inside the coach box hear her — and he must have.
He must have heard her, but he did not give any orders for the coach to stop, and so Helen was left standing there, dirty and dishevelled, humiliation burning through her exhaustion piece by piece.

"Look what you have done," Miss Travers said when she trudged inside. Her face was white. "Whatever it is, you must stop it! You will ruin yourself."

"I know," Helen said quietly, and she did.

She told Frances the next day. She waited until Frances let her inside the cramped inn room, and she did not waste time before making her intentions known. "I must have a reprieve," she said.

"What do you mean?" Frances asked.

"The Red Country," Helen said bluntly. "It is making me lose my wits. You will have to go there alone for the time being."

Frances turned even whiter than Miss Travers. "Why are you saying this?" she asked. "The Red Country is our secret. I could no more go there alone than I could dance a waltz by myself."

"Yet you have, and you will," Helen said. "You may not have any responsibilities, living here as you do. It does not matter if you lose track of time, if you wake up without any remembrance of what you were meant to be doing instead. But I have so many!" Her voice caught in a snare. "I had an appointment to speak to a man about a governess position. He was in town for the afternoon, and he would speak to me on behalf of his sister, who has two children. I did not make it in time."

"I... I am sorry," Frances said, and there was no mockery in her voice. "But you shall have other opportunities. They shall be lining up at your door to interview you!"

"You have spent too much time in dream worlds," Helen said bitterly. "Governesses are a dime a dozen. One has to only reach into a fish barrel and find one."

"That does not mean you must stay away from the Red Country!" Frances cried. "You are being rash! We will be better about keeping time, that is all. We shall work out the calculations. I shall bring a watch."

"No," Helen said. She knew that Frances was capable of persuading her on this matter, so she could not even let her try. Her mind was made up, and for the sake of her own prospects, she would need to stay strong. "I cannot return with you. I may in the future — I do not mean to say goodbye forever. However, until I find a position, I must focus all of my efforts on that. I must not play games."

Frances coloured. "It is not a game."

"It is not life either," Helen said.

"It is better than life!" Frances said. "There, we have no husbands, no headmasters, no gods!"

"We have no money either," Helen retorted. She took two steps forward and placed her hand on Frances' forehead. "You are burning a fever. How is this good? How is this a sweet life?" She began searching for a cloth and some cold water, moving through Frances' pitiful belongings.

"You said you enjoyed your time there!" Frances accused. She closed her eyes heavily, and her lashes were a smear against her sticky, hot skin. "Did you lie to me? Have you been lying to me all along?" Her mouth flattened. "Is being the White Queen not infinitely more entertaining than
being plain, boring Helen Dunn?"

Helen felt as if a strong hand had a grip on her heart, and it was squeezing without mercy, unending. She was running again, in her mind, running after Mr. Fenton's coach, and she would never catch up. An entire road of uselessness and wasted potential were all that greeted her. "Plain, boring Helen Dunn has never lied to you," she said, her voice filling with gravel and sand. "She does not plan to ever start." She stopped searching for cold water. She touched the back of her knuckles to Frances' cheek, and Frances gasped as if she were dying.

"This is only for now," Helen said, a small concession. "Until I straighten my affairs. Wait until then, and we shall see."

Helen did not lie if she could help it, but the truth was another matter entirely, a two-headed beast straight from the Revelation of St. John — and she could not run from it either. She had known for a long time now, the rift that was separating her and Frances. It was as small as the distance between the school and the town; it was as large as the rocky angles of the Jabberwock's lair, scratching scars too freshly new to even heal.

The truth was this: that Frances had left England behind, traveling by voyage to forests where she no longer knew Helen's name.

That Helen did not have the privilege of following her bothered Frances — Helen did not think so little of her friend that she did not expect that. Frances would miss her, certainly, but Helen had seen new visions inside the Red Country. She now knew that Frances' yearning would be soft-tempered steel, easily breaking underneath the delights of her court and her companions. She had the Hatter, after all, and she had queenliness and beauty. What could Helen offer that would be better than that?

Envy was a persistent worm in Helen's heart, but it was only a taste of the larger feast. Helen could live with her envy only because she was first living with necessity, and so she did not regret her decision. A reprieve from being the White Queen was the natural solution, for she could not afford to lose her mind any further, Frances or no Frances, envy or no envy.

She was, she could admit to herself, frightened. She could admit this because she was honest, and honesty fared better in private than even a small twist of the truth, which was what she had given Frances.

Helen did not see how they could ever return to what they used to be. That was Frances' nature, to ignore practicality. Frances had not even considered the implication of Helen's words — she had only heard Helen's explanation that if she were to find a position as a governess, then she would be free to return to the Red Country. A cooler-headed person would have seen the immediate flaw in that argument: that if Helen were to find a position as a governess, she would have to leave. She would leave Stratford, leave Montclair, and she would never return.

She would have to leave Frances, and there was the truth for all the good that it did, a rusty knife slashing through what had once been lovely silk. Helen lay in bed in the Montclair dormitories thinking of this while listening to Agatha Gilbert snore, and she felt as if she were choking on the muscles in her throat.

What could she do? What choice did she have? Why did Frances not see? Frances could weep
pretty tears and soliloquize about the Red Country all she wanted, but the more she spoke, the more Helen saw her own truth. Frances cared not one jot for Helen's well-being; she barely even cared for her own. Why, if Helen's future burst into flames and all her education and ambition went to ashes, Frances would not be perturbed in the slightest.

She would be *glad*, Helen realized, staring into the darkness. She would be glad, for then she could retain Helen for the Red Country. If Frances was glad, then it would not matter if Helen was miserable. She would have the White Queen, and that was what mattered. More than plain, boring Helen Dunn.

She was not certain when she had stopped being herself for Frances, and had become simply the White Queen instead — but she was certain that it had happened, at some point, perhaps the very moment the vorpal sword had sliced through the Jabberwock's head.

The wages of victory, she thought, and her eyes stung with regret.

She began throwing herself into the proceedings of her imminent graduation. There were younger girls to train, a new Head Girl to take through the paces. Her name was Lily Barton, and she followed Helen about with her freckles and her careful questions, listening intently as Helen explained her duties and her responsibilities. "It is not easy," she said, showing Lily how to compose a schedule for Sunday town visits, "but it is work, and it will prepare you for the future. You must see work as its own lesson."

There were times when she caught Lily watching her with a respect akin to awe, and it was that strange, uncomfortable sensation once more, as when the animals had bent knee and bowed.

"You must wake earlier than anyone," Helen said. "Much is expected of you. You must never complain."

"I won't," Lily Barton promised. Helen softened in compassion.

"You will do it well," she said. "I have been watching you ever since you first came to this school. I had hoped that it would be you who would succeed me. In fact, I did not hope, for hope requires doubt." The flush that traveled up Lily Barton's neck made Helen laugh, and there was a momentary lightness to her demeanor, which quickly vanished when she saw the way Lily Barton was staring at her, with mingled hope, confusion, and want. It was as if she was waiting for a hero to kiss her. The thought was both absurd and stunning at the same time. Heat flushed through Helen's body, though it did not show on her face.

She moved briskly to the next task.

She did not visit Frances the Sunday the girls went to town. She did not give into the temptation, as dogged powerful as it was. She purposefully kept her eyes from even traveling down the route that would lead to the Three Candles Inn, and so it came as a surprise when Miss Anderson found her and engaged her in private conversation.

"Is Frances well?" Helen asked.

Miss Anderson did not say anything for a long time. She pulled at the gloves on her fingers, and peered at the sunny skies; then she said, "She spends much of her time sleeping."

"That is good news," Helen said cautiously. "Sleep is restorative." It was much better than Frances going down to the alley and disappearing inside the Red Country. Perhaps she was developing some sense after all.

"I do not know if it is good or bad, merely that it is," Miss Anderson replied. An angry expression
overtook her face, one that Helen did not expect to be directed towards her, for she had always made it a point to treat Miss Anderson well, even though others mocked her for being a bluestocking with no marriage prospects. Helen's own future, she supposed. "She loves you," Miss Anderson hissed, and Helen jerked her neck about, wondering if anyone overheard. No one did; the other girls were some lengths away, happily chattering amongst themselves. "Why can you not see that? She loves you, and it is killing her."

"You do not know her, only the facade she wants you to see," Helen replied. "Frances' heart is a room with no doors."

"How cold you are!" Miss Anderson scorned. "You have no feeling."

She wanted to explain. Frances had died a long time ago, before the Jabberwock, before the sword. She had died in a room with her mother bleeding out against the carpet; she had never recovered from it since.

*I would walk through an island of fire for her, Helen thought. I have traveled to foreign kingdoms for her. I have slain monsters. But in the end, it is the same as it was in the beginning. She lives in her palace and lets no one in. There is no door. There never will be a door.* Grief overshadowed her, and she swallowed it down, her own brand of medicine.

A fortnight passed with all of its trappings. Helen finished reading her German books, learned a complicated new stitch, and completed her training of Lily Barton, who had a mouth like a freshly cut rose but who still could not make Helen stop and stare. It was a dispassionate ending. Helen had once looked forward to her graduation with pride, knowing that she would be leaving her mark on the school. Instead, as the date approached, she felt weary, eager to finish as quickly as she could. Frances and the Red Country had sapped the rightful joy from her, she thought in her more uncharitable moments.

The third week in May, she tied up her hair and put on her bonnet. She took a basket from the kitchens, and after dealing with the cooks, filled it with leftover bread, cheese, and morsels of dried meats. She covered it with a striped tea towel, and then, with the bright sunlight turning her blond hair golden, walked to town.

Miss Anderson greeted her at the Three Candles Inn with distaste. "You decide to visit now?" she asked. "I see you are not immune to guilt after all."

"It is not guilt," Helen said. She had no name for the weight that made her teeth ache, or her head feel thick and stuffed with wool. She was aware that Miss Anderson had a low opinion of her, probably thought Helen a dreadful girl with no loyalties or morals. Perhaps she was even right; Helen felt the old head pain return as she climbed up the stairs to Frances' room.

She knocked, calling out Frances' name.

Miss Anderson appeared behind her like a bulldog. "I told you, she sleeps."

"Well yes," Helen said. "That is why I am knocking."

"She rarely wakes," Miss Anderson replied, cleaning her hands on her apron. Helen looked at her. Miss Anderson smiled without humour. "Did you mistake my meaning when I said that she sleeps? She sleeps like she is dying. She wakes only for meals, and seldom them."
What could that signify? Helen wondered. There must be a plausible explanation. Frances loved the Red Country too dearly to waste time sleeping that she could spend in the Red Court instead. When Helen used to visit her, she would always immediately be dragged to the gateway in the alley, even when sometimes Helen proposed sharing a meal in the inn, or playing a game of cards. If Frances had wanted none of those things with her only friend, sleep would hardly be a contender.

Miss Anderson unlocked the door and Helen slipped inside. Indeed, Frances was asleep, lying on her bed with her back turned to the door, silent and still, her ratty blankets slipping off her hips and pooling to the floor. Helen took the blanket and covered her properly.

"Frances," she called.

There was no response.

"Frances!" she said, more loudly, but Frances did not wake. Helen felt a stab of fear; perhaps this was more like dying than she wanted to imagine.

She waited. She set the basket of food on the ground, and she sat on the narrow windowsill where she alternated between staring out at the street and the fine weather, and then at Frances, a dark shadow on the dirty bed. Frances slept as if it was her one true calling, even when there was a raucous downstairs and Helen jumped at the sound of a bottle smashing. It did not register for Frances. She slept, and she slept, and she slept.

Helen had planned this excursion ahead. Lily Barton would make her excuses for her. She did not want to take advantage of the girl's trust, but in the end it had bothered her little to do so. She could not avoid Frances forever, and she wanted their time together — one of their last few moments before everything changed — not to be rushed or filled with misshapen time.

Helen waited, and when the shadows of the trees stretched into evening shapes on the floor, Frances finally stirred.

"Oh," she said, "it is you." She sounded like a bored, haughty debutante.

Helen tried to hide her wince. "Yes, it is me. Look, I have brought you food."

"A waste of your time," Frances said, "as I am not hungry." She flipped over on the bed so that their eyes met, and she held Helen's gaze with a sign of clear challenge.

Helen tried for a friendly tone. "I am told you have taken up excessive napping as your new hobby."

"Miss Anderson thinks so," Frances said coldly.

"I think it is more than that."

"I am not quite inclined to believe that you do think," Frances said, tossing her hair over her shoulder with that familiar arrogance.

"I think that you have found a way to slip into the Red Country in your mind," Helen said. "I think that you can create a gate anywhere you so desire." She pressed her knees together and watched the last of the dappled sunlight move over the patched ceiling. Frances' silence was answer enough. "That is a great power," Helen offered.

"You could have it too, if only you were not so stubborn," Frances said.
Helen smiled faintly. "You overestimate me. I would never the power over the Red Country as you do. I am not as well-suited for it."

"You are such an English creature," Frances said with an abrupt snarl. "Your world is a world of shopkeepers and finances and dreary, mundane chores. You are no better than the butcher who spends his day among pigs. You think you have ambition? You could be a queen."

"I tell you this over and over again," Helen said. "I can be a queen in the Red Country, but who would take care of me here? When my rent is due and my body needs to be fed, who can I rely on when my mind is elsewhere?" She lowered her voice. "You can only live in one world, not two. It is folly to think otherwise."

"I am making a looking-glass," Frances said.

"I know."

"You do not know," Frances said. "If you cannot cross over whenever you wish, then use this looking-glass I shall make for you. Take it with you when you become a governess. The Red Country will never be further than your own room; matters will be simpler then."

"You still do not understand!" Helen protested. "A looking-glass will shorten distance, but it will not shorten time, and questions will be asked; I can hardly pack a looking-glass the size of which fits a person into my valise!"

"I will make it smaller then!" Frances said.

"That is not my point!" Helen's voice was a rush of wind in her own ears. "I cannot be as you are. Why can you not see that? I cannot live in the Red Country without a single care. I cannot make it my home. We are too different, you and I." Her blood thudded through her veins, as heavy as a summer storm.

"Perhaps you are right," Frances said flatly. "Perhaps it was a mistake to become friends at all."

Helen had brought up the subject, but still she felt Frances' words like an execution. She looked away, and it was only through numb lips that she was able to say, "Come with me. Live in this world with me. The real world."

"I walk in this world I was born to," Frances said, "and all I see are shadows."

Another aspect of Frances' immense power: she awoke the darkness buried deep inside Helen's mind, and once woken, it began to prowl. Helen struggled with it silently, remembering how Lily Barton had gazed up at her. Hope. Confusion. Want. How innocent Lily was! Her desire may have seemed deviant, but was not genuinely remarkable. Helen had spent too many years at a private girls' school to think otherwise. She was fully aware of nocturnal fumbling and clumsy, giggling kisses, reenacting scenes out of penny novels, dreaming all the while of future husbands and handsome suitors.

Their desires were as harmless as house cats; Helen's was a tiger full grown, sharp and aching and full of teeth. There would be no husband for her, no suitor, nothing except for this, standing across from Frances in a room that was too small to contain both of their beating hearts.

Frances' mouth parted into an 'oh' when Helen kissed her. She trembled when Helen put her arms around her, but she opened her mouth more deeply, and Helen could feel the life in her breath, the wakefulness. Frances may choose to sleep the rest of her life away, but she would not do it if Helen was there to distract her instead.
Rough music moved through their blood, ten thousand stories. Helen cupped Frances' jaw and kissed her. Yes, with the clumsiness of those younger girls, for Helen had not engaged in such behaviour, despite her desire to — she was green and untried, but in this the Red Country had given her a boon. Kissing Frances was more frightening than facing the Jabberwock, but what did it matter? The Jabberwock was dead, and they were no longer friends.

If this was the one door Helen could open before she left, then she would open it with all the force she was capable of. She would smash it down. She would blow it to pieces.

She kissed Frances until their mouths hurt with it, and until Frances' breathing was a ragged rhythm, drawn too quickly and too much. Helen stroked her throat with her fingers, feeling the pulse there, and then she kissed the skin over the throat, trailing kisses up to Frances' jaw.

Frances shook.

She was scared, Helen realized, and it made her pause. She looked up at Frances, and Frances stared back with moonless eyes. Then Helen remembered that what Frances knew of love, she knew from her parents; what she knew of love, she knew of death.

"I am not him," she said, and Frances wept.

Their kisses tasted of salt, of seas, of swords hidden at the very bottom, dangerous treasures and perilous joys. Frances wept until her shoulders shook, until she howled, and Helen held her all the while, pressing caresses into her unkempt hair. Frances cried until it seemed she had no tears left in her, and then she rasped dry, heaving noises that would move a saint.

Then Frances turned her head and touched her salty lips to Helen's cheek, and it was her turn to kiss Helen, overcoming her with a deftness that was surprising but not unwelcome. She pushed Helen down to the bed and kissed her wildly, shamelessly, a queen demanding everything that was her due.

Helen wrapped her arms around Frances' neck and held on. She gasped as Frances moved her hands south, touching her breasts through the fabric of her dress, through the material of her corset; she could feel the heat of Frances' skin, and her nimble, clever fingers. "Did you ever think of this?" Frances growled, moving her fingers to trace Helen's breasts in circles. Helen was helpless but to give her confession.

"Yes," she said, and then Frances was forcefully undressing her, ridding her of the fabric and the corsets and the laces, until Helen was bared before her. Helen blushed red underneath Frances' frank gaze. No one but her mother had ever seen her like this, gutted from her navel to her toes.

Frances lowered her head and kissed each breast at the peak. Helen groaned.

"Let me," she urged. "Let me." She rolled them over so that Frances was pinned beneath her, and there were dried tears at the corner of Frances' eyelids. Helen licked them away, feeling Frances' shudders — no longer of fear, but of the desire of the beasts, the desire they had always been told that women did not have. Such lies, Helen thought fiercely. She was rough with Frances' dress, even though Frances had few left to call her own. Helen did not care. Helen divested it from Frances as if it were nothing more than a rag, and then Frances was there, the last country, the first country, the country Helen had been trying to circumnavigate all along.

"My God, you are beautiful," Helen said.

"It has never brought me much," Frances said, but she looked up at Helen with melting eyes. Helen crawled over her, kissing her until they were both breathless. Then she slid a hand to
Frances' breasts, fondling them until Frances arched up against her, making noises that sounded almost painful, save for the breathy sigh at the end of it and Frances' delicious squirm against her naked torso.

Their inexperience made them eager, and in the desperation of their parting, shame fell to the side as if it was no more important than dust. Helen had dreamed of this, though at first she had been too ashamed to admit to herself. But she had. She had dreamed of this years ago, of the silken tangle of Frances' curls in her hand, of the smoothness of Frances' skin against her mouth, of the wet slick between her legs when Helen slid her fingers downwards, exploring Frances' nub with the same dedication she explored her own — silent and hidden in the girls' dormitories.

What would Miss Travers say if she knew this of her? What would Mr. Montclair the Elder think? Helen Dunn, touching herself in the solitude of the night, hiding her own pleasure underneath the covers.

She touched Frances now, carefully at first, and then more boldly. Frances shuddered and groaned and whimpered, stuffing her hands into her mouth so that she would not make noise. Helen removed those hands, Frances' slickness passing between their fingers. She wanted to hear everything, and she said as much, ruthless in their final moments as she returned her fingers to Frances' folds, sliding them inside one by one until Frances pressed down with her hips and pushed Helen further, gasping.

The walls of their courts had grown without measure; the Red Country had flourished all around them, but this was neither of that. This was real. Gardens bloomed in the curve of Frances' naked back, and in the wetness of her desire, Helen could taste the rain. It washed everything away, every thought and resentment, until at last Frances sobbed out against the sheets, contracting hard around Helen's fingers, her hair splayed about her flushed face like a crown of thorns.

Later, as Helen was slipping into her dress, tying up the laces of her corset as best as she could, Frances spoke. She remained supine on the bed, her back facing Helen, an empty mask. She had closed herself back inside her walls, and there was nothing left that anyone could touch. "This is goodbye, is it not?" she asked.

"I wish it were not," Helen said, sick with the desire to trace Frances' collarbone with her fingers and steal one last kiss.

"I wish—" Frances said. "I wish I had never met you."

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_She will not wake_, said the hastily scrawled letter that one of the kitchen girls delivered to Helen. The writing was bold and scraggily, signed by Miss Anderson. Helen gazed at that single slip of paper, at the impermanent ink, and then she folded the note into her skirts and finished her business. Her mind felt like a tundra, cold fields full of glaciers.

"You will come and visit us?" Lily Barton asked hopefully.

"If I have time," Helen said. She returned to her rooms and finished packing her few belongings into her valise, carefully smoothing out the fabrics of her dresses and shawls. She did not have much, but she wanted to go to her first employment as elegantly as possible, so that they should have no reason to doubt her worth or her upbringing. "The family has five children. I imagine I will have my hands full, though they mostly want me for the girls and not the boys. The boys have
their own proper tutor." She smiled wryly.

"Well, that is the way of things," Lily said. "The boys go to Eton. We come to Montclair."

"Indeed," Helen said. She looked out the window, at the coach that was waiting for her. This one would not drive away like Mr. Fenton's, and she supposed she should feel relieved at that. Employment at last, with a good family, her future for the next few years secured. If she played her cards right, she could stay with the family indefinitely, teaching the children they had now, and the children they would have in the future. The mother was still of child-bearing age; there would likely be more children.

Instead she felt an iron cage over her ribs, and winter underneath her skin where she shivered. Frances, she thought, and oh, she was desperately foolish! Frances did not want her. Frances wanted the Red Country more, and it did not matter that Helen had laid with her, fingers entwined in Frances' hair, her mouth full of Frances' kisses. Frances had not asked her to stay; she had known that Helen would not.

Girlhood friendships end, Helen told herself. That was the undeniable truth, real in a way that a willow tree overhanging a river in the Red Country was not.

Miss Travers waited for her by the door. She embraced Helen warmly. "Be well, my dear," she said. "You will have a happy life. I know it. You are too clever and sensible not to."

Helen inhaled the dusty scent of her hair, and the affectionate press of her fingers. "Yes," she said, and her voice sounded faraway, drifting through valleys without sunlight. "I have a letter that I mean to send," she added. "Do you think you could send it for me, Miss?"

"Without a doubt," Miss Travers conceded. She received the envelope and glanced at the address. "To Viscount Esterbrook! What, might I ask, does this mean? You know the wretched man no longer lives in England."

"I am not sending the letter to him," Helen replied. "I am sending it to his solicitors. They manage his estate and his British affairs, including that of his daughters." She set her jaw tightly. "Frances will not survive on her own. She will not want this, but she needs her father's money or else she will die." It did not matter anymore, she thought. If Frances had chosen to fall into a sleep without waking, living forever in the veil of the Red Country, it did not matter if she returned to her odious father's estate. Her mind had left her body and had become senseless to her surroundings.

Frances' body — Helen cared for its fate even if Frances did not. Food, shelter, warmth, medicine. Each one of them worth more rubies than all the treasure coffers in the Red and White courts combined.

"What if the viscount or his solicitors refuse to take her in?" Miss Travers wondered. "She has run from them once already. It was a poor showing."

"A viscount has his pride," Helen said. "Even if he does not care for Frances as a daughter, she is his blood, and I am told aristocratic families care for such matters. He has no sons."

"After everything he has done?" Miss Travers said. "He has no daughters either."

No, Helen agreed. A man had to deserve his daughters. The ache in her was enough to start a war. She turned it aside, made it face the walls. She could not think of it now. The coach was waiting. "Please," she said finally. "Make sure the letter arrives safely." Miss Travers nodded and gave her assurances. Resolute, Helen picked up her valise and stepped out of Montclair Manor, a pawn moving her two spaces forward, out of the school atrium and out of the shadows, save for the
shadows she carried inside her, stitched too tightly to let go.

ACT IV
ALICE

High summer in Oxford, the bees fat with pollen, and the girls were running barefoot through the fields like they were wildlings. Their legs propelled them through the grass and the flowers, and although Helen had instructed them not to take off their shoes, they slyly slipped them off regardless, throwing them in the air when they thought she was not paying attention. Nonsense, of course. Helen always paid attention to her charges, even when she was inclined to indulge them as she did now, the three girls underneath the fine July sky.

"Come, come! We still have our lessons!" she called out, cupping her hands over her eyes to block out the cheery sunlight. "We did not come here to play!"

Edith flung herself onto Helen's lap. "Why did we come here?" she asked, wriggling her little toes. "Oh, tarts!" She grabbed for one in the basket.

"Such abominable manners," Helen scolded, for it was true. The Liddell sisters were spoiled by their mild-mannered, smiling father; she would have never gotten away with half of their antics at half their age. But she allowed Edith's searching hands nonetheless, and Edith produced a custard tart with a rebellious smile, like Boudica leading her armies against the Romans.

Edith was the youngest, at eight years old, and the most given to impish behaviour. Lorna was the eldest at thirteen, and already drifting away, feigning disinterest in the silly games of young girls, though she cast a longing eye at her sisters when they ran without care. Alice was ten and a perfectly somber middle child. Helen watched as she meandered through the grass, picking at flowers and weeds and her own curiosity.

It was 1862, and instead of being taught, now Helen did her own teaching. She called once more for Lorna and Alice to join them, and they did with great reluctance, spreading their dirty, grass-stained skirts over their knobbly knees. "Holding our lessons during a picnic is a treat your father has allowed us, but we must remember that they are still lessons," Helen said, doling out their workbooks.

Alice wrinkled her nose. "Maths," she said. "I hate maths."

"What use will maths be to me?" Lorna asked dismissively. "I will marry a handsome soldier, and he will never ask me for the multiplication tables."

"You will need to manage a house, will you not?" Helen asked. "You will need to calculate the
price of silverware and the salaries of your servants, and how much it will cost to throw a fancy party for all of your soldier friends. That is maths."

Edith giggled. The thought of marriage and soldiers was too far off to her. Alice stared glumly at the grass, poking blades of it through her fingers.

"Alice," Helen said gently. "Five times five."

"Twenty-five," she replied without hesitation, for despite her protests, she was a fine mind at mathematics and most other subjects besides. Alice was bright — bright in a way neither of her sisters were, though Helen did not like to admit it. Lorna was clever in her own way, knowing how to dodge people she did not want to speak to and parents who bothered her, and for Edith... well, it was really too early to see. But Alice, she thought with fondness. Alice was truly the daughter of an Oxford dean, there was no doubt.

"Six times six," Helen said.

"Thirty-six," Alice said. "I told you, I wanted to go with Mr. Dodgson today. He promised to take me boating."

"Mr. Dodgson is a fine man, though I doubt he is very good at boating," Helen said, thinking of the shy mathematician. "If he agrees to make you go through your multiplication tables beforehand, then by all means, let him."

Alice frowned.

"See?" Helen said, smiling. "There are times we spend with our friends, and then there are times we spent in activities we might not enjoy, but which are necessary for our future."

"I'm sure you enjoy it," Alice muttered. "I'm sure you loved to learn and never complained."

"Not always," Helen said, but she did not pursue the topic further. Her enigmatic answer made Alice narrow her eyes at her, but then Helen threw at her a third mathematical question, and Alice was thus preoccupied. She was a recalcitrant child, but she enjoyed a challenge, and Helen used this to her own advantage. As long as Alice had something to think over, she could be reasonably disciplined — and that was the role of a governess, alongside the teacher. To make sure her students did not burn the town down when she was not looking.

It was especially important to impress their current lessons upon them, for in a fortnight the Liddells would be spending the rest of their summer at their holiday home in North Wales, in a house called Penmorfa where, from every window, one could hear the sound of water. Helen thought Penmorfa and the rest of North Wales extraordinarily beautiful. She would join them some weeks later, after she was given her own reprieve to visit family.

She had already sent a letter to her mother in Northumberland, and they were expecting her by train on the 16th. Helen thought of them wistfully, perhaps with more yearning than she had even at Montclair. But that was the nature of things, she decided. She must needs one thing to hope for, and it used to be Frances, but that time had passed.

A dark cloud came over her thoughts, but she quickly blew it aside. Why did she think of Frances just now? There were three girls watching her with expectations, three girls sprawled out in the summer fields; there was no room for the ghost of a fourth.
Circumstances had taken her far from Montclair, but she had contrived to create a new home. It was a cozy, pleasant home, living with Mr. Henry Liddell, Dean of Christ Church, and his wide-ranging family, who were quite unlike any family Helen had ever witnessed before, even her own. That her parents and her brothers loved her, she knew, but they had never shared the easy affection that Mr. Liddell gave his children and his wife every single day, as if when he plumped the depths of his good nature, there was always more to be found. He was a man with an endless bag of treats, and Helen admired him greatly, both for his intellectual brilliance in the study of classics, and for his generosity. He was a most excellent employer, and she had learned to be glad that she had missed Mr. Fenton's coach, if only because it had made her available for Mr. Liddell's.

She woke every morning to the sound of running feet, to the noises of children playing children's games, and of servants, and Mrs. Liddell organizing the house, and of the constant barrage of guests who passed through. Mr. Liddell had many university friends, distinguished gentlemen who paid visits as easily as they played cards, and Helen was given the opportunity to be introduced to them.

If she could not go to Oxford, this was the next best happenstance, and some of those very gentlemen were kind enough to answer her keen questions.

"You have reached into a muddy pool and caught a fish!" one gentleman, a scholar of rhetoric, told Mr. Liddell.

"Indeed I have," Mr. Liddell said. "Miss Dunn is a marvel. A mind as sharp as any man's."

With another Oxford gentleman, Mr. Dodgson, she played chess, and more often than not, she allowed him to win. What use was there in championing her own skills? Mr. Liddell and his friends seemed to appreciate them, but Helen was cautious; she had heard the stories of governesses who became too uppity for their own good. Besides, she enjoyed the smiles on Mr. Dodgson's face when he won, as if it were a pleasure too fleeting to be true. It did not pain Helen to be considered his intellectual inferior. It was what everyone believed, no matter the compliments to her woman's mind.

It was a good life. She could not deny this. She had seized a perfectly decent fortune. A good pay, kind employers, and students that she could manage — was there a greater Eden for a young lady of her circumstances?

So why am I not happy? she thought, and she turned over the answer inside her head, which she had hoped would be obscured, but which was not. It stood in her thoughts plainly.

Helen had made a home among the Liddells in Oxford. Frances had made her home in Mr. Parnell's Home for Young Ladies in London. The name of the institution immediately called into mind the Montclair School for Girls, but no one would ever confuse them as such, for it was well known that Mr. Parnell ran a sanatorium, an expensive upper-crust residence for noblewomen whose families thought them mad.

There, Frances continued to sleep. Helen knew this for she had written to Viscount Esterbrook’s solicitors once, and had written to Mr. Parnell himself a second time. He had refused to answer, on the grounds that she was not a member of Frances' family, but she had secured the aid of Mr. Liddell, and Mr. Parnell had opened to him. From the letters, Helen knew that Frances lived in her own private room at the sanatorium, that she was fed and bathed regularly, but that she did not wake.
She is a lifeless doll, driven into hysterics within her own mind, Mr. Parnell had written. Even when we prick her with a needle, she does not respond.

That he had dared to prick her with a needle made Helen furious, but what could she do about it? It was what she had hoped for. Frances had abandoned them for the Red Country, but at least her body would not rot and die. She had money, and she had caretakers, none of which Helen had been able to provide her.

And if Helen dreamed sometimes of a red landscape, of rocks that spanned the horizon like a lace fringe, of rabbits and monsters and a single cup of tea upon an altar — she did not share her dreams with anyone.

—the sea crashing against the cliffs.

—a garden of white roses.

—a sword as sharp as a high soprano's note.

No, Helen thought, waking up in the middle of the night with her limbs soaked in sweat. Why do I think of this? Why do I continue to remember such painful and useless matters? She thought then, unbidden, of Frances' hair twisted between her fingers, and the expression on Frances' face when Helen had slipped one of those fingers inside her.

Helen buried her face in her hands.

It would not do. She must learn to set aside her wretched longings. Frances would not wake, but she had the opposite dilemma: she could not allow herself to dream. She was nearly twenty now, no longer a Montclair schoolgirl. They expected her to be a woman, and so she would be. She would cast away her girlish whites. She would learn to navigate the madlands of her own womanhood until it made sense, and she would stop thinking of
gardens, tombs, arterial silk, a kiss, a knowledge of flight.

She should not have been so haughty as to presume. She should not have been so needlessly romantic to imagine that the Red Country would ever leave her be. Even in the dappled sunlight of an Oxford summer, with the heat blowing in with the eastern winds, she could taste rose petals underneath her tongue. It set her to agitated sweats, to being even more curt towards the Liddell girls than she would have liked.

"Is there something the matter?" Edith asked, and Helen despaired at her own self. Edith was such a sweet child! She did not deserve a temperamental governess, much less one who half dallied in dreams of fairy worlds.

"I am fine," Helen told her. She tugged at Edith's sleeve before Edith could dash away impishly. "Have you finished packing for Penmorfa?"

Edith twirled her thumbs. "No."

"Well, what is taking you so long? You want to bring your favourite toys, do you not?"

"I can't find Dollie!" Edith burst out. Helen stared at her for a moment, hiding her own
amusement. "I have searched and searched and searched! But Dollie isn't anywhere!" Edith clutched at her skirts, crestfallen, and Helen understood why she had been scampering about the house all day, getting underfoot and irritating her mother.

Helen knelt down to Edith's eye-level and gazed at her solemnly. "Never fear," she said. "We shall find Dollie together. She cannot have wandered very far."

"Alice took her," Edith sniffed.

"Oh?"

"Alice always takes my things!" Edith protested. "Alice is a nasty brute."

"I doubt Alice has much of an interest in dolls," Helen mused, for Lorna liked boys, Edith liked toys, and Alice liked... well, only saints knew what Alice liked. Helen found her crawling among the dirt and the insects more often than not. "Regardless, let us go find your sister and ask her," she added to Edith. "She should be in the drawing room, practicing the pianoforte." However, when she cocked her ear and listened, she realized she could no longer hear the strains of Bach that had been permeating the house earlier.

"She has run away," Edith declared jealously. She grabbed Helen's hand with her sticky fingers — jam, Helen thought absently. She must give Edith another lecture in keeping away from the kitchens and the jams.

"We will find her," Helen said.

It would not be difficult. The Liddell residence in Oxford was not a grand house, not by any measure or calculation, for Oxford deans could not compare to dukes or viscounts, whose summer homes overlooked the town every bit as sharp as their homes in Mayfair Square. Helen and Edith made quick work from the first floor to the third. It would have been quicker still if she did not have Edith along, but Edith was charming company, mumbling to herself and crawling on her hands and knees, even when Helen scolded her. "Your dress," Helen said, but Edith merely grinned.

"Mama says I will have a new dress in Penmorfa," Edith said.

A new dress for every season, Helen thought wistfully, looking down at her own plain skirts, the very same skirts she had worn at Montclair.

They made their way from the house, dodging a harried Mrs. Liddell who was trying, as she did every summer, to organize the house and arrange her affairs before the family left Oxford. They dodged the endless parade of visitors, and the maid as well, Edith running ahead of Helen into the patch of garden behind the house. It was a beautiful garden, meticulously kept by Mr. Liddell, who professed an interest in all matters horticultural. Charlock and dog roses grew in bunches, twisting alongside thatches of yellow corydalis, with petals like children's fingers, reaching out towards them in the afternoon light.

They found Alice napping underneath the family's beloved beech tree, her mouth agape, slightly snoring. Edith immediately prepared to jump on her and bounce, but Helen pressed a finger to her mouth. "Shhh," she said, and then she crept forward. She tore a handful of grass from the ground and sprinkled the stalks over Alice's twitching nose. Edith giggled and followed suit, until finally Alice sneezed and came to wakefulness with a jerk.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Dollie!" Edith said. "You took Dollie!"
"What would I want with Dollie? She's ugly," Alice said scornfully.

Edith scowled. "You should not be sleeping! You're supposed to be practicing pianoforte. I will tell Mama!" She jabbed her finger in the air, indicating their mother, or God.

"I was not sleeping," Alice said.

"No?" Helen asked lightly. "Then pray tell, what were you doing? Practicing your restful eyes?"

"You would never understand," Alice said, folding her arms over her skinny chest. "I was — I was in another land."

"Silly," Edith said.

Helen studied her. "What do you mean, you were in another land?"

"There was a rabbit-hole!" Alice insisted, her normally desultory tones turning urgent. "There was a white rabbit, and he had a timepiece, and I followed him into the rabbit-hole where there was a cake that could turn you very large and a bottle that could turn you very small and — oh, why am I telling you this?" she said. "You would never believe me."

"You are stupid," Edith decided. Alice grabbed at her. "That hurts!"

Helen batted Alice's hands aside. "You must have had a dream," she said, and awarded herself for keeping her voice so clean and antiseptic.

"It wasn't a dream!" Alice said. "I have proof!"

Edith started giggling again, but Helen watched as Alice reached underneath her bottom to a piece of paper she had been lying on the entire time, rumpled as it was from the grass and her sleeping body. "Look at this!" Alice said triumphantly, shoving the paper at Helen. It was a note, written on buttercup paper, with a red sigil on the top in the shape of a bloody thumbprint.

High summer in Oxford, but coldness bore down on Helen, a queer nausea.

"I met a beautiful, mad queen," Alice said, "and she told me to bring this back. She said somewhere in England there is another queen, and I am to give this to her." She frowned. "Only I do not know how I will deliver a message to Queen Victoria. I will have to sneak into Buckingham Palace, I suppose."

Helen looked down at the letter. She did not want to, but want had little to do with anything. Want was crafted out of wish-fluff and fantasy. What she had wanted was to finish her last year at Montclair without event, without remark, to be as ordinary a lady as possible. What she had, instead, was this, the weight of the paper in her hand, and the smell of the salt from the bitter sea.

I have tried to forget you.

Oh, believe me, I have tried! I have made my court a misery in defiance of you, and yet this I remember: you said that you loved me.

"Queens cannot love other queens," Edith said with all the wisdom of her eight years of existence. "I told you this was silly!"
"You chit! Queens can do anything they like," Alice hissed back. "They have no rules! What I would give to be a queen!"

The bells were ringing in Stratford upon Avon, big church bells the size of Indian elephants, and Helen walked through the streets as though she were swept by the currents of a dream. Why she had come here, she could not say. She should have been on a train to Northumberland, to visit her mother and her father while the Liddells were vacationing in Penmorfa, but she knew it could not be as such. Not when Frances' words were a scar in her memories. *You said you loved me,* she had written, in the same hand she once used to destroy French workbooks and botch her arithmetic at school, and Helen felt not as if she were eight, or nearly twenty, but as if she were eighty, an old woman born and dying.

She wondered if soldiers felt like this, returning from war. She wondered if she saw the Red Country the way they did the battlefield, a place of strange happenings and blunt violence, a place which she bore no particular desire to return to. But a place of intense passions and high heat nonetheless, and a place that occupied her in nights when she could not sleep, recalling the way Frances had looked upon her throne.

Helen was not a soldier, but she did have a sword to match. Somewhere on an altar, in the holiest of shrines. She wondered if one day another girl would come to claim the vorpal sword, and if it would sing for her.

The bells of Stratford were singing, so loudly that even at the door of the Three Candles Inn she could hear them. Miss Anderson met her in the alleyway, wary and distrustful. She had not warmed to Helen in the two years since. "She is gone, you know that," Miss Anderson said straightaways, wiping her hands on her apron. "You called her father's folk and had her sent away to that sanatorium."

"I am aware," Helen said. "But I am —" She struggled over her words. She nearly took a step backwards. She thought about trains, and bleak shores, and the comfort of Penmorfa, but then she gathered her strength and plunged onwards. "I am curious," she said. "Did she take all of her things when she left?"

"The solicitors did," Miss Anderson said. "What, are you looking to loot her now?"

"Hardly," Helen said coldly. "I was simply wondering if there was a looking-glass among her possessions, and if so, what happened to it."

"A looking-glass?" Miss Anderson echoed.

"Frances had talked of—" *building one* "—purchasing one," Helen said.

"With what money?" Miss Anderson laughed dryly. "That girl had barely one jot to her name after my brother squeezed her for rent. He would have liked to squeeze other parts of her too, I imagine! But Frances was fierce, more serpent than human. I am not surprised she went mad. She was too unearthly for this world." She pressed her lips together. "Her father's men took the looking-glass."

"Do you know where?" Helen asked.
Miss Anderson shrugged. "They mentioned selling it to a pawnshop in London. It was a rather cheap-looking product, if I remember. Very plain. Not worth thinking about. Why do you want to know?"

*I want to put an end to things,* Helen thought. Out loud she said, "Mere curiosity, as I mentioned. Thank you for your time." She turned and began walking away.

"I do remember one other fact!" Miss Anderson called after her. "When she mentioned the looking-glass! She said there was a door in the woods behind the school. I have no idea what she was talking about."

Helen stopped. She pivoted on her heel. "There was a door in the woods behind the school," she replied. "And one in this very alley, and another in London, and one, apparently, in a rabbit-hole in Oxford. There are more doors than I can even begin to imagine. The door in the woods, however, is closed to me. I cannot open it." The coolness of leaves against her fingers, and entire symphonies of air. The White Queen barred from what had once been her own kingdom.

"What is it that you are trying to find?" Miss Anderson asked.

Helen said, "I know as little of the answer as you do." She smiled faintly. Catherine Walton had, the day before she had left the school, told her that she must never smile for her scar made it look ghastly. Catherine Walton had been none too kind to her towards the end. But Helen smiled anyway, with frost and with steel. "Tell me, Miss Anderson, what do you know of love?"

"They call me a spinster," Miss Anderson said. "I am not supposed to know anything of love."

"I want to stop dreaming," said Helen.

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In London, Helen took a room above a hatter's and did not look through any of the windows. She was not a city girl, and the griminess of London bothered her after a lifetime of clear sunshine and hale meadows, but she was determined to do her business anyway, finding the pawnshop where Viscount Esterbook's men had sold Frances' looking-glass. She met with one solicitor in Trafalgar Square, laying siege to him on his way to a more important meeting, and he scribbled down an address for her before squarely shooing her aside.

It was irritating, but it would have to do. The address was what she had come for, not the respect. She took an omnibus from Trafalgar Square to the pawnshop in question, squeezed beside a heavy lady with two children, and a somber-faced poet who, when Helen mentioned a fondness for poetry and Milton, proceeded to give her directions to a bookstore where she could purchase his entire oeuvre. "I desire to be the Milton of the modern age," he said, and took great pleasure in using their close proximity to lecture her on the evolution of blank verse and by contrast, the power of new poetic styles and the modern English imagination.

Until Helen responded, "Imagination is pleasant enough, but it does not light the braziers when you are cold, nor does it make bread for your hungry children."

"Madam," he began, greatly distressed.

She did not continue their conversation. She thanked him politely and then unboarded the omnibus, walking the rest of the way through crowded streets, where hawkers endeavoured to sell her doughy candies in the shape of songbirds, and cheap rushlights that would burn her path
wherever she might wish to go.

"I am here for the looking-glass," Helen told the owner of the pawnshop, who greeted her with a grunt. That she was not here to buy or sell irked him greatly, but Helen had excellent manners and could give off an air of shabby gentility if she wished, like the best lady's maid. Clearly he took her to be the representative of a more important personage. "Do you still have possession of it?" she inquired.

"No one wants it," he said, and he allowed her to go into the back room and see the looking-glass for herself.

Miss Anderson was correct: it was an unremarkable mirror with a thick chestnut frame, its only virtue being its grandiose size. It was as tall as Helen, as tall as it needed to be for a person to walk through, and Helen felt the nausea return, a sickness that grasped her chest and squeezed down, merciless.

She reached into her handbag and produced a single piece of smeary chalk. She wrote on the surface of the looking-glass, three words.

*Are you there?*

She felt exceedingly foolish as she waited, but then the air seemed to chill and it was summer no longer, but autumn, an autumn where the shadows stretched all about her, and she could see the silhouette of a hand on the other side, exquisitely feminine.

*I am agog.* Words appeared in red, slowly spiking outward. *I was under the impression you were pretending I did not exist.*

Helen scribbled back. *That is unfair.*

*So says the Heartless,* Frances wrote. Her penmanship was every bit as jagged as Helen remembered it to be. It would never appear on an invitation to a gala, or an important letter. And yet it had appeared on the most startling missive of Helen's life, delivered by the grace of a child.

Helen wrote, haltingly, *It seems we have inconvenienced each other by making such a mutually lasting impression.*

*You flatter yourself.*

*Do not be cold with me,* Helen wrote, chalk crumbling over her fingernails. *Be angry with me!* *But do not be cold.*

A longer pause, long enough that Helen wondered if Frances had left. But then she received an answer.

*I mean it truly. I do not forget, yet I cannot bear to remember.*

There was a reason memory seemed dull and ephemeral in the Red Country after their victory, where every moment felt as freshly urgent as the next croquet game, and the past was long buried in empty palaces and broken eggshells. There was a reason why the Red Country had played itself to be a paradise.

*You have made me into a widow,* Helen wrote, chewing on the juices of her own heart.

Frances' response wasted no time. *Come back. You thought the Red Country would ruin you because it was not real, but it was never that. It was you. You made it real.*
Helen felt it then, the sure and dreadful knowledge that love would never leave her, that it would settle into her bones and make a home for itself there until the day she went under the earth. Dante had his Beatrice, Petrarch had his Laura, and she had Frances Leviathan, daughter of murderers, queen of beasts. She lifted her hand to the mirror, presumably to form letters, but it was as if her hand had a method of its own, and every letter turned into an unintelligible shape.

Her treacherous memory twisted up and offered, on a platter, the poetry of Sappho she had read in the cottage on the hill. It was on those warm days when Helen had curled up in an armchair, listening to Frances pattering downstairs in delight.

Myrrh poured on your head
and on soft mats girls with
all that they most wished for beside them.

_Give me a sign_, she finally managed to write in an unsteady slant. She could not embrace risk the way Frances did; she could not see past the solidness of her own hand. As a result, she waited out a silence that was longer than all the rest put together. She waited, and she waited, and there was no answer this time, not even when the shopkeeper came to the back room and demanded she leave.

In Penmorfa it was raining. Grey mist and thin fog cut through the streets of the northern township, and Helen sat at the writing desk in the family parlour, reading over Lorna's workbooks and grading her compositions. Her pen moved in scratchy patterns over the worn paper, and in her moments of pause, she listened to the sound of rain against the glass, and the murmur of conversation from the Liddells as they sat on the chaise longues behind her, each preoccupied with his or her own task.

It was a measure of Mr. Liddell's affable nature that he allowed Helen and Mr. Redfield, who was the tutor for the Liddell sons, to join them in the evenings like this. Most employers would have preferred a distinct separation between the family and the staff; it was yet another reason why Helen knew she had been blessed in her post-Montclair opportunities. To think otherwise, to yearn for other futures, was supremely selfish. She felt the shame of it every time she looked into Mr. Liddell's smiling face.

"Do you know that I came upon Mr. Sutton in the town square?" Mr. Liddell was saying to his wife.

Mrs. Liddell looked up from her crochet and gave a murmur of support. It was not truly an answer to anything, but that was her own nature. Whereas Mr. Liddell was direct, Mrs. Liddell preferred to operate in shadows. At times it could be frustrating, particularly when Helen asked for her thoughts on a particular point of her daughters' education. "I will leave it to you," Mrs. Liddell usually said, but that was dangerous territory, for she could be was quick to criticize if she did not approve. Even so, Helen reflected, Mrs. Liddell was a good sort of woman. She was kind and she allowed Helen freedom.

"He looked quite hearty!" Mr. Liddell continued. "The south is agreeing with him, I think. His belly is approximately twice as large as it used to be."

Alice snorted.
"You could beat it like a drum, my dear," Mr. Liddell said fondly.

"Mr. Sutton talks too much," Alice stated.

"Whereas you say little and never the right thing," Mr. Liddell said. Alice blinked, but he leaned over and stroked his fingers through her hair. "Do not think Miss Dunn spares me her accounts of your wild ways. Even when I am not around, I know what you are up to, little monkey. And I think you will like the story Mr. Sutton told me. It is curious and strange, just like you."

"Sounds like Alice, certainly," Lorna said. Alice scowled at her.

"What did Mr. Sutton say?" Edith asked eagerly. Helen slowed down the pace of her pen to listen.

"He was in London just a few days ago, and he heard the queerest tale from a friend who works at Mr. Parnell's Home for Young Ladies. It is a sanatorium," Mr. Liddell added.

"What is a sana—torium?" Edith inquired.

"It is where they keep madmen," Alice said bluntly.

"Ooh!" Edith's eyes shone.

"Madwomen too, poor souls," Mr. Liddell said. "In any case, this is the story Mr. Sutton said he heard from his friend: that there is a particular patient of the sanatorium who sleeps and will not wake. She is a viscount's daughter, a lovely creature, but she has been mad for years. She lives inside her own mind, and also behind lock and key, I might add. Though it is usually of little use, for where would sleeping women go?"

"Dreams," said Alice.

"Why yes," Mr. Liddell conceded. "Other places as well, it appears. For a week ago, the staff went in the morning to spoon-feed her, as they do. However, when they undid the locks and opened the door, she was gone! Plum disappeared!"

"Was there a window?" Alice asked.

"No window," Mr. Liddell confirmed. "No other method of leaving the room but the door, which everybody said had been locked, for they test the locks every night before they go to sleep."

Mrs. Liddell spoke. "She must have had help then. One of the staff must have unlocked the door to allow an escape."

"That is possible," he acknowledged, "but also strange, for there are only two sets of keys to that room. One belongs to Mr. Parnell, and the other to his most trusted retainer."

"A vanishing madwoman!" Edith said in tones of great excitement. "She could be prowling the streets right now!"

"Magic," Alice said.

"There is no such thing as magic," Lorna replied. "Right, Papa? There cannot be magic in the world, surely, for there is only God."

"Quite correct," Mr. Liddell said mildly. He looked at a frowning Alice. "But there are marvellous tricks that are almost as good as magic. She must have been very clever, this madwoman behind the locked door." He grabbed Alice with his hands and tickled her until she squealed. "Be careful
Mrs. Liddell cast her gaze about the parlour. "Miss Dunn," she observed, lowering her crochet. "You look quite feverish. Are you well? You should retire upstairs if you are not."

"You are not afraid, are you?" Alice asked, squirming away from her father.

Helen exhaled. "I am not afraid of the story," she said. "I am not ill either. I am simply... tired." She rubbed at her cheeks. "Perhaps I will retire early."

"Take as much rest as you need," Mr. Liddell encouraged.

"Thank you, sir," she said, and rose.

Alice could not be brought to attention the next day. Even as she sat with Helen by the window, reading books together while watching the rain, she would not remain composed. Her feet banged against the wall, her head lolled on her neck, and she sighed as if fragments of her heart were cracking in two, until finally Helen lowered her copy of Aesop's Fables and asked what was the matter.

"Lorna knows nothing," she said.

That there was great competition between the older Liddell girls, Helen knew. Neither Alice, Lorna, nor Edith were especially friendly with each other, to the great chagrin of their father, who imagined his house a sororal utopia. He had asked Helen's advice on it once, and although Helen had no sisters, only brothers, she had grown up in the presence of girls. She had assured him that it was the norm for sisters to fight like regimented soldiers, only crueller.

"What is it that Lorna lacks knowledge in?" she asked patiently.

Alice swung her stockinged feet and probed at a bruise on her knee, from when she had climbed a tree and then promptly fell. Helen was only thankful that the fall had been soft, and bruises the only pain.

"She thinks she will marry a prince!" Alice accused.

"Does she?"

"Perhaps not a prince," Alice amended glumly. "But it is all she ever thinks about! Handsome men in uniforms, come to sweep her off her feet. It's stupid."

"Why is it stupid?" Helen asked.

"She says I will be like that too, when I grow up!" Alice cried. "She says that I laugh at her now, but when I am a young lady, I will understand exactly what she is talking about. I won't. I won't. I won't be like her."

"Then you won't," Helen said.

Alice narrowed her eyes.

"I am not trying to tease you," Helen said. "Most of what we are exists in our own heads. If you
do not think you will be like Lorna when you grow up, then you are not like her. Lorna believes she is Lorna. Alice believes she is Alice."

Alice looked down at her feet. Her tongue darted out and licked her cracked lips. "What if I grow up and I am not Alice?" she asked, fearful. "Not now-Alice. What if I am future-Alice, and future-Alice is different?"

Helen raised her eyebrows. "Of course future-Alice will be different. We are all changed when we grow older."

"Even you?"

"Even me," Helen said.

"Are you certain?" Alice asked doubtfully. "Papa says you are like a rock."

"Your Papa did not know me when I was ten years old," Helen said. She threw her memories back, recalling her childhood. "I used to run across the fields and throw acorns at my brothers. I was quite the wild child, as you are."

"Then you changed," Alice said. "You became boring."

"That is one explanation," Helen said wryly.

"I will never be boring," Alice declared. "Even when I am as old as Lorna. I will always try to learn at least one new fact a day, like Mr. Dodgson suggests. I will go on adventures."

"It is easy to go on adventures," Helen said, "but rather more difficult to return."

"What do you mean?" Alice asked.

"I mean—" Helen stopped and looked down at her young charge, with her dirty feet and nestled hair, and her small round mouth ready to shout lamentations at the world. Had she ever been as headstrong as Alice? Likely not. In Alice she did not see much of herself, but she saw a resemblance even more precious: for in Alice she saw a sliver of Frances, what Frances must have been at that age. She could not bear to dampen Alice's spirits with the recollection of her own mistakes.

_We are all changed_, Helen thought suddenly, a spark of fire running through her. _No, that is not true. We are not changed. To suggest so renders us as objects, and humans are not objects. We are not changed. We change._

Alice continued. "I shall have adventures even when I am as old as you, Miss Dunn."

"Yes," Helen said forcefully. "Yes, promise me that you shall."

There was a path to most anywhere one wished to go. From Point A to Point B to Point Z, from the Cottage on the Hill to the Court of the White, from Northumberland to Stratford upon Avon to Oxford to Penmorfa. It did not matter if one made the journey by foot, by coach, or by train; in the end, one would arrive. Some people made the journey quickly, but some made it slowly, and when the rain gave way to the sun and Helen looked up at the sky, she found that her eyes stung.
It was not because the sky was so wonderfully blue, though it was, a shade that made her think of all the lazy days at Montclair, lying on the grass with Frances' head on her lap.

She wanted to see Frances one more time. She wanted to be able to speak to her, to lay out her own position and then to hear Frances', and make up her mind then. She did not know if she wanted to return to the Red Country, for her opinions of that place were mostly unchanged — it was a strange land, untrustworthy, harshly beautiful and endlessly deceptive. Helen was not sure if she could welcome a country that tried to convince her she was a queen, when really she was not.

She was Helen Dunn, and as of the stroke of midnight on June 29th, she was twenty years old, a woman grown. She knew her French and German. She knew Berlin embroidery. She knew her Geoffrey Monmouth and the history of the kings of Britain. She also knew what it felt like to wear a skirt so old it was fraying, and to scrub a floor, and to chase after unfriendly pupils who would never see her as their equal.

She thought, I could be happy like this, if Frances were here. For Frances was all she lacked, but unfortunately lacking Frances was like lacking water in an ocean.

Helen told herself that it did not matter what the outcome of her meeting with Frances would be, if anything would change at all. What she desired was closure, for the problem, she reasoned, was that her leaving Montclair had not been closure at all. It had been necessity, dictated by a timeline of employers and graduation not her own. She would have wished to stay longer if she had been given a choice — that she did not have a choice was the crux of the problem.

Now she had choice, and time. She told herself this in repeated iterations. Choice, and time, and to see Frances once more with both in hand.

But where was Frances? Missing and gone, vanished from her cage at Mr. Parnell's, a magician performing her last miracle. If Helen could go into the Red Country and find her! However, if the doors at Montclair were now closed to her, what hope had she of opening another door? Crossing the worlds was Frances' gift, not hers. Helen's feet were solidly on earth, and for the first time she regretted it.

It was a bitter conundrum. The very first time she wished to make change, and she was fixed in one place. Frances had not replied to her in the looking-glass. Very likely, Frances had decided not to care at all, and why should she? There would be other queens and other companions. The Red Country could offer her countless delights, each one more loyal than Helen.

She thought of this as she walked through the town, as she ran her errands, as she combed her hair at night, taking it out of its pins.

Frances, she thought.

And then one day: a prince, a sign, a queen.

Alice found her in her rooms and put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing stuffed up in here? Mama has had me looking all over for you! You are supposed to be with Lorna."

"Lorna has gone to town with Miss Griffin," Helen said, glancing up from her correspondence. "Is there a problem? I am sorry to have hidden myself away. I thought no one needed my services right now."

"There is a visitor for you," Alice said, and then she swirled away, too restless to be kept in one door for long.

Helen set down her lonely mechanisms of pen and paper, and moved slowly to the foyer. She
took the stairs one by one, a ship descending. Before the foyer, she met with the Liddells' maid, who bobbed a curtsy. "A lady to see you, no card," the maid said. Helen thanked her. She put her hand on the door to the foyer and pushed it open, curious as to who this visitor might be. She knew no one in Penmorfa, though she did have a cousin in the neighbouring villages.

A young woman waited by the window, looking out at the meadows when Helen entered. She was extraordinarily beautiful, a dark-haired Artemis wearing a dress with a bustle of such deep red that it was nearly black. She had a hat with a silvery veil pinned to her sleek curls. She seemed older than Helen remembered, older and taller and thinner. She seemed wearier too, but no less devastating to behold. When she heard Helen's approach, she did not turn around, but she did open her apple-coloured lips to speak.

"Do you know that Wonderland gold is worth quite a fortune when one carries it to England?" she said. "I have had Hatter cross over and make investments in my name. He enjoys it. Money is more entertaining than executions, he says, though not as amusing as whist." She took a breath. "Which to say, it has been two years, and I am no longer dreadfully poor. I have means. I have developed — what did you call it? Sensibilities."

"I always suspected you would," Helen replied, her voice astonishingly steady when it had the most reason not to be. "I only thought you would go to it kicking and screaming."

"I did. Then I was told that in the Red Country, queens must take part in quests. They say it is a narrative obligation. They say many things now that you are gone, most of which I ignore, but this idea has merit. Every few years, a queen goes on a new quest, and brings back a treasure of untold value to her court."

"Is that so?" Helen asked.

"They said jewels will do, or a Hand of Glory if I can manage it, or an Australian wombat. I told them, perhaps I shall break the rules. Perhaps I shall leave on a quest and never come back."

"They must have grieved then," Helen said.

"Yes. They must have," was the reply. "You see, in my mind, there is only one thing worth questing for." She turned around at last and swallowed. Her voice wavered. "I am not quite a white rabbit," Frances said, "and you may tell me that we have grown wise, but in the process we have also grown too old for wonder."

Helen moved forward. She did not feel the motion of her feet, only the paper spaces folding between them, all the points on the map coming together to form a single destination. She reached it when she took Frances' hands in hers, feeling warm skin beneath cool leather gloves. She held onto them tightly. "I know now what I did not know before," she thought.

"It is enough," she said.