Queen o' the May

by just_a_dram

Summary

Underland once had seven kingdoms. Laid out like a chessboard, the kingdoms of White, Black, and Red reigned over the lesser kingdoms, the suits: Hearts, Clubs, Spades, and Diamonds. With the Red Queen exiled, however, only one monarch was left to reign in Underland, an unnatural state. And the Grumblers were astir.
Queen o’ the May

Prologue

Alice had made a pretty little Queen when she was precisely seven and a half with blonde curls that needed cutting, black patents, and stripped tights. However, if Tarrant was Honest—*and he made it a practice to be so!*—Alice as a little girl had made him rather nervous. That pixie of a girl with rude tea party manners had seemed to have a touch of destiny about her, and Destiny could be a weighty presence.

Thus far her destiny had been a good one: her destiny was to slay the Jabberwocky, to live in
Underland, and to love him, luckiest of all hatters. Underland had ordained it and the stars had charted it. Although, as Alice was fond of reminding him, how she went about all those things was entirely up to her Discretion.

If this was not the extent of her destiny, however, if it was to be her destiny to wear a crown, she balked at the prospect. His May Queen had resolutely refused to take up her proper crown even upon her final return to Underland, and everyone was aware that Alice could be rather Stubborn. She tossed her head and frowned when he would tease her by reciting the lines that would name her queen:

"There's many a black, black eye, they say, but none so bright as mine;  
There's Margaret and Mary, there's Kate and Caroline:  
But none so fair as little Alice in all the land they say,  
So I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be Queen o' the May."[1]

'You may have my crown if you are so very fond of it,' Alice was given to saying. Only, he was much too pleased with his storied Hat to trade it for a Crown. A fact his Clever Alice no doubt anticipated.

Never mind: she was his and that was enough, he wagered. Destiny would have to be content.

And so, one day Tarrant stopped asking her to be a Queen.

Just as Underland desperately needed one.

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Chapter Two

The bright smiling faces of the flowers in an array of color outside the palace gave no hint of the dangers that might lurk within, but they were mouthy as usual. That kind of reliability was reassuring to Alice in her current state of disarray.

"Hello, Alice," a Daisy chirped as she passed by.

"Hello," Alice responded, slowing down to greet the garden.

"Is it that messy petal-ed flower again?" a red Rose asked in a high pitched voice, attempting to twist in her bed, so that she might see their visitor.

"Yes, it's the Alice flower…with the regrettable petals," a Daisy agreed. "They're nearly flying off her head."

Indeed, the breeze was brisk and her hair whipped about her face, sometimes getting stuck in her mouth.

"Try smoothing them out," a Tiger-lily helpfully suggested.

"It does no good," Alice said with a shrug. Her mother had done her best with pearl handled brushes and blue ribbons and pins, and yet she had nearly always failed to see to it that Alice's hair was not the victim of fly-aways. She doubted she could do much better herself even if she cared to do so. Her mind wandered, and she wondered if her little girl would have fly-away hair as well. Alice suppressed a giggle at the thought, pressing her lips together in a tight smile of secret anticipation.

"You might ask the gardener to help you with them," a yellow Rose suggested.

True enough: garden twine might hold her locks in place. There were any number of solutions she might try if she truly cared to affix her fluttering petals in place. One was suggested to her quite regularly. "Tarrant thinks I should wear a hat. Would that improve my appearance you think?"

Alice inquired, patting her loose, blonde curls.

"Oh!" the bed of flowers cried out in echoing unison.

"That would crush them frightfully," a Tiger-lily wailed. "Please don't consider it."

"She is the most careless flower," a Cabbage Rose bemoaned. "She won't have a petal left at this rate."

"Well, I don't think I'll be donning one anytime soon. The Hatter is very talented, but I do prefer my head uncrowned by headgear," Alice admitted.
"None of us have crowns either," a Daisy said a little wistfully. "On account of our being just pawns."[1]

"Oh, but you're lovely just the way you are," Alice assured them. "A crown atop your petals would be gilding the lily."[2]

"And what of us?" the Cabbage Rose inquired.

"And us?" a Daisy chimed in.

"Well, that goes for all of you. You're all naturally beautiful."

The flowers swayed, dancing in unison, brightened by the compliment.

"But if you'll excuse me, I need to see the Queen."

"Ah, the White Lily's mother," a Tiger-lily nodded in the breeze. "Give her our warmest regards. Her voice is so sweet that I grow nearly two inches when she sings to me."

The Tiger-lily only made some little sense—more than one would expect from a flower—so Alice could not properly promise to give her regards to the mystery woman of whom they spoke, but she waved cheerfully instead, as she hurried off towards the palace.

Having made her way through the winding white marble hallways of the palace to meet with her monarch, Alice approached the White Queen with a level of apprehension she was not used to feeling when dealing with Mirana. She had a foreboding about this meeting, however, that she simply could not shake. No matter her husband's insistence that all would be fine. No matter how she scrubbed behind her ears and shook out her wet tresses.

"Thank you for coming, Alice." The Queen's countenance and tone betrayed nothing, despite Alice's considerable misgivings.

"Can I be of service, Your Majesty?"

Mirana pressed her palms together and fluttered her lengthy lashes. "Should you like to take tea before we discuss business? Thackery has baked the most deliciously daring dried fruit scones—with dates, my dear!—and the Darjeeling is delightful. Doesn't that sound pleasant?"

It is a day for things beginning with 'D', Alice conceded. Indeed, it all sounded most tempting, but she was not sure that she could sit through teatime in her current state of unease. "It sounds lovely, your Majesty, but if it is all the same to you, I would prefer to know how I might be of assistance."

The Queen, who seemed somewhat stunned by Alice's hurried request, paused for a palpable moment before speaking, "If you like. I do have a request. One which I hope you will accept."

Alice's stomach flipped. She could not afford to promise anything without knowing the full extent of the Queen's request. "What is it you would have me do?"

Mirana's hands floated to her shoulders. "I would have you join me as a queen of Underland, my dear Champion."

Alice was aware that Tarrant considered her a Queen of his Heart, and he had reminded her on more than one occasion that she rightly was a queen of Underland, but she had brushed this off as nonsense—she had no wish to be a monarch. "I'm quite happy as I am," she hedged, trying to dissuade Mirana from what she no doubt considered a considerable honor.
"You are aware of the unrest in Queast?" Mirana asked, floating across the room slowly, her heavy, white skirts swaying as she moved.

It was as she thought. "Yes. Tarrant believes them to be Grumblers."

"No doubt Hatta is correct, but…their grumbling makes me feel…” the Queen paused, twirling her fingers. "Their ingratitude raises dark thoughts in me Alice. I imagine what it would be to wipe out all Grumblers. No one would take advantage of my Goodness then. I can teach a painful lesson if need be." As she spoke, her teeth flashed white between blackened lips, suddenly seeming threatening in their perfection.

Oh, Alice wished Tarrant had been correct. Generally she liked to be right, but this once she wished heartily that she had been wrong. What would it do to him to know that his Queen, for whom he had sacrificed so much, had such terrible darkness threatening within? Threatening all of them. For it would no doubt only begin in Queast and end in sheer Madness.

Alice opened her mouth to rush in and cover the somewhat shocking confession of the Queen's with lighthearted words, but Mirana pressed on. "The power I wield as the sole Queen of Underland is intoxicating, Alice. As the years pass, I find that I don't like it, this feeling of drunkenness."

Mirana's plastered on smile made Alice feel coldness in the depths of her soul. Would Tarrant stand as Champion for the Queen and be forced to wield the sword against the villagers of Queast? Alice was unsure her husband's soul could take such a beating. He was a good creature, the best of creatures, and he would revolt against it, she was sure.

Mirana stood before a gilded chair, the top of which she traced with a graceful finger. "You're very quiet, Alice," she said in a tone Alice could not read.

"I'm merely curious." Mirana would no doubt believe that: Alice was famously curious.

"Yes, I should explain how you might assist me. That is no doubt weighing upon your mind."

"A bit," she confessed, attempting to smile, but failing.

"Underland is meant to have many kings and queens," the Queen explained, gesturing airily to her five-pointed crown. "There were once seven kingdoms and Underland was a more peaceful place for it, the monarchs less…mad. " Mirana laughed before the smile fell from her face so suddenly that Alice imagined she could hear it hitting the floor and shattering on the marble. "You would be doing me a favor by taking up one of the abandoned crowns, you see. You would remove some of my temptation and carry some of the burden of power for me."

"Am I not already technically a queen of Underland?" Alice asked softly.

Mirana shook her head dismissively. "Not anymore, my dear. You waited too long to claim your throne when you returned."

"Nivens says I am always late."

The Queen hummed, contemplating her White Rabbit servant's penchant for punctuality. "He likes to keep to a very strict schedule, as he owes his fortune to promptness," she said, holding up one finger, "but in this case you are not too late. You will simply have to go through the process again. Alone. Two cannot be on one square, do you understand?"

Not in the least, but if the process was not dangerous, this was perhaps something Alice could do for the Queen, for her husband, for the whole of Underland if indeed the Queen was beginning to
teeter on her totter. "What must I do?"

Mirana’s smile suddenly seemed more sincere or at the very least imbued with relief. "The countryside is laid out in squares like a giant chessboard. If you can move all the way to the eighth rank, I will make you a Queen."

"A giant chessboard?" Alice echoed. "I hadn't noticed."

"I don't suppose you were Looking. One must really look, you know."

She did not know there was anything but hill and vale for which to look. "No, I don't suppose I was looking." Alice swallowed. "Will it be dangerous?"

Mirana swept forward and folded Alice into her arms in a crinkle of chiffon and lace and beads and pearls. "No, no. Of course not, my dear. It will simply test your Resolve, but you have that in spades." The Queen released her and drew back, eyes gone wide and her white teeth flashing in inspiration. "Would you like to be the Queen of Spades, Alice?"

"I…I suppose I wouldn't mind being anything but the Red Queen."

Mirana tilted her head thoughtfully, "No, I don't suppose any of us are eager to have that throne be occupied. But there are five other kingdoms from which to choose."

"I'm sure any of them would suit me."

"Well then, is it settled?"

Alice nodded, "Yes, I suppose it is."

Although Alice was eager to return home, she did not manage to escape the palace without being further detained. Half way to the main entrance, the Cheshire Cat materialized before her, looking particularly snide.

"I could have told you this was going to be a problem."

"To which problem do you refer?" she asked, although she knew enough by now to suspect that Chessur was in the know about Everything, even matters of State.

"There are several problems aren't there? But, you presently wish to keep one of them a Secret, so I won't spoil it, although I'm sorely tempted."

Alice frowned, attempting to sidestep her unwanted floating companion, but he had a nasty habit of rematerializing just in front of one. It irritated her to think he might know something of the Secret she shared with her husband, which did not count as a problem unless it forced Tarrant to step forward as Champion. That would be grave indeed.

"No, I mean to say that I could have told you that by removing one Mad Queen, you would only create another. But no one thought to ask me."

He sized her up. "No, I mean to say that I could have told you that by removing one Mad Queen, you would only create another. But no one thought to ask me."

Yes, this Cat, who did not like to mix in politics, knew a great deal about the realm. "You usually don't like to be bothered," she retorted.

He rolled end over end, a flash of grey and turquoise. "Try to stay on task: the Queen is as mad as…well, a mad hatter, which makes you rather unusually well equipped to deal with such a
Predicament. What do you mean to do about it, the Alice?"

Alice closed her eyes: what could she do but take up the crown herself, unpleasant as it struck her?

"You'll end up walking into a wall if you don't open your eyes. You've been spending too much time around your mad husband, I fear. Walking about with one's eyes closed, honestly. Must I remind you that eyesight is terribly useful for proper maneuvering, hopeless girl?"

Stopping short, she spun to address him, "The Queen isn't Mad."

"That's pure nonsense. We're all mad here," he said with a grin that nearly split his face. "Now," he said, motioning with a flick of his tail, "shall I show you something?"

"What would you show me?" she asked, although she was already following him. The reminder of some of the nasty things Dinah at times had been eager to present to her made her stomach give protest.

"The Oraculum isn't the only thing worth reading, you know," he said, hovering before the entrance to Marmoreal's Royal Library.

"You want to show me a book?" Thank heavens! There would be no headless mice laid out in great ceremony.

"Oh dear," he said, narrowing his eyes in mischief, "you can read, can't you?"

She had no intention of honoring that with a response. Instead, she brusquely pushed the heavy white door to the library open. Once inside, she could see that a sizable book in leather binding was already spread upon the wide reading table at the center of the brightly lit room.

"An illiterate queen would be so unfortunate," he purred, settling on the table and winding around the book, as Alice approached it.

Before bending over the text she chuckled, "It would serve you right if I named you to my high council."

"Oh, wouldn't that just boil the Hatter's blood? I might even consider it for pure sport," Chessur mused. "But never mind that. There is a lovely sunny spot I'd rather be sleeping in, so if you would apply your rudimentary reading skills…"

"Yes, yes," Alice said, fingerling the yellowing page as gently as its apparent age called for. "What is this book?"

"The Lost Book of Underland. Only, it isn't lost. It's Found, but the Royal Book Binder is busy today and couldn't be bothered to change the title page. Besides, I thought it best not to raise too much suspicion about the Queen's state of mind. We might end up short another head if the villagers in Queast thought their Queen Mad and not just Derelict in her duties."

"She isn't derelict," Alice corrected the Cat a little defensively. "There is simply a lot to be done."

"Undoubtedly," Chessur replied acerbically.

"Did you find this?" she asked, flipping a page.

"It was lost in the Duchess' library at one time." Folding one paw under the other, he considered her, "I believe you'll find ample justification within it for becoming Queen Alice."
"I needn't be convinced. I've promised the Queen already."

"Oh, yes, you've been a dutiful subject thus far, but you're not Happy about it and as Time passes, you'll be even less Happy about it. You're bound to learn about a great deal of Unpleasantness as you make your journey."

How encouraging.

"Nevertheless, the thrones of Underland must be filled," he said, as the fur on his back bristled. "We might have done better to crown another than remove Iracebeth, I fear, unless she was already too far Gone. The more the Merrier in this case, it would seem," he said, resting a paw on the open page, indicating with an extended claw a circle that contained within it seven overlapping symmetrical circles. The colors of the circles of the illustrated symbol alternated red, black, and white. "Seven, Alice: there must be seven. When your husband does not want you to go traipsing across Underland, remind him of this: seven days in a week, seven notes in a scale, seven metals, seven colors, and seven kingdoms of Underland. You begin removing them and the rest go…unbalanced, Mad. We'll all suffer for it."

It was becoming clear to her that the task set before her was greater than she had imagined. "We need to reseat all of the kings and queens of Underland."

Chessur rolled onto his back. "Well, 'we' is a regrettable choice of words. I believe there are people in these parts that call you 'Champion'. Why not put those championing skills to use, hmm? Make yourself useful and not just the Hatter's mate?"

I believe you know why. "Very well, I'll work to reseat the kingdoms of Underland, if you mean to say that it won't be enough for me just to become queen."

"Well, it's a start," he said, licking one paw. "Mirana was rather better balanced when her bulbous headed sister sat the throne. Give her a Queen Alice and it might buy us seventy years."

That sounded like a very long time, and it made the task seem less insurmountable. Good people to sit a throne were not easy to find, but if she had decades to do so, it might eventually be accomplished.

"May I take this with me?" she asked, hefting the book. There were a great many questions still left unanswered.

"Sticky fingers," he grinned.

"Perfectly clean, I assure you," Alice replied, using more Sauce than she presently felt.

"See that they are. I won't have the Royal Librarian rubbing my fur the wrong way over soiled pages if not." She was nearly out the door when Chessur issued one final warning, "And don't even begin to consider dog-earring the pages: that's just the sort of thing a dog lover would do."

…

Tarrant had trained his ear—not as skilled as his fingers, but still a useful body part—for the sound of Alice's return, as he sat at his hats, his shirtsleeves rolled up his arms, and twiddled away with feathers and buttons and pins. Therefore, the sound of her feet scuffing on the threshold of their home, as she knocked the dust from her boots, was more than enough to alert him to her presence. Springing from the workbench in a cloud of flying trim, he nearly tripped over the table leg in his eagerness to reach the door. Flinging it open, he stood before his wife, who looked somewhat stunned, her hand extended as if to reach for the doorknob.
"Alice," he lisped, opening his arms.

"I was only gone for the day," she good-naturedly protested, as she stepped into his embrace.

"Yes, but I missed you." Her Aliceness was vital to his contentedness after all. There was the magic of Underland always working to keep them on the same path, drawing them together when they parted ways. The feeling was not painful exactly, but a tugging at the spirit when the distance between he and she grew too great. Beyond the magic of it, however, simply her being Alice made her indispensable to him. Every bit of her from her little toe to the freckle on her earlobe. She had a lovely beauty mark above her right hip that he sometimes covered with his hand while they were...

"He's opened me twelve times since noon," the knob began to grumble, but Tarrant gave the door a swift kick with the back of his heel, sending it open wider and gaining some distance from the meddlesome, mumbling knob.

She brushed back his springy hair, twisting a lock of it around her finger, before kissing him on the cheek. She had missed him too it would seem. Once she had allowed herself to do so, Alice had given herself over to him most freely, as if it was the easiest thing in the world, to be herself with him, to be free together. Likewise, now that he felt sure of her regard, depending on someone had never felt so liberating, and missing her occasionally was a small price to pay. It only reminded him of what a share of his heart she occupied.

"Are you tired from your walk? Would you care to sit down? Or perhaps you would like a cup of tea? Are you thirsty, love? Or perchance…" He had always been solicitous, but since they had discovered they were to be three, he had taken Solicitousness to new precipitous heights. There was always something More he could do for his Alice and his little Alice.

"I'm fine," she assured him, patting his chest reassuringly as she slipped by him and entered their home. "The walk was refreshing and I have…good news, I think."

He stopped, a wide grin lighting up his face. "I was right." He knew he would be. There was no possible way that he could not be. Things were looking up, and his Queen turning on her people did not fit within his Vision of his future, Alice's future, their future together. It was not quite the Oraculum, but he had set some store in that Vision.

"Don't crow, Tarrant. You might not like what I am to do," she said, pulling a book she must have acquired at Marmoreal from her sack and setting it down on the table with a sizable thud.

He watched her silently as she chucked the empty sack into the wingback chair in the corner and dusted her hands off on her knickers. She looked only slightly harried from her day's travels, but he feared the real disruption was on the inside and not her most estimable outside. His right hand twitched at his side. What had the Queen asked of his wife? Perchance it was not worth hearing at all. "You might consider putting your hand over your mouth."

"Why," Alice began, but Tarrant interrupted her in his eagerness to stop her.

"Because no news is good news," he advised, demonstrating briefly how a hand might be employed to keep News from escaping. If she did not say it aloud, it would not be Real. They could both ignore it, like the pile of linens in the corner of their bedroom to which neither of them was eager to see.

"No, that shan't be necessary," she promised him.

"But…" he said, letting his instructional hand slip from his mouth, "you are not to be Champion."
"No, I'm not."

"Well then," he said with a careless wave of that same hand, "it can't be so bad."

"I'm to reclaim my throne. Underland is not finished with me yet, it would seem. Don't say 'I told you so'," she warned, pointing a finger at him.

He only just thought better of snapping at that finger, as if to bite it, nibble it, lick the length of it. Instead, he stated most solemnly, "Wouldn't dream of it." He bowed, swinging his arm before him. "Queen Alice. How charming. How lovely." Visions of gowns and capes and hats fit for a queen flitted through his churning mind, although he knew that Alice would no doubt turn her nose up at all those things. Still, he would not mind making her a coronation gown if she could be convinced of the necessity of such a garment under ceremonial circumstances.

She shrugged, looking uncertain. "Apparently, Underland plans to continue having its way with me without reference to what I might Want."

Tarrant swallowed, his Adam's apple making his bowtie bob nervously. He repeated inwardly to himself that Alice Wanted him. That had been his unquestioned reality for some time now, and he had no desire to go back to the dark place, where the madness lurked and stalked him. She had chosen him. While she was his wife thanks to Underland's magic, she was Happy, having also chosen him of her own free will. "You're happy," he croaked with the hope that by saying, he would remember the truth of it.

Alice glanced sideways at him as she twisted her soft blonde hair about her fist, attempting to tame it into staying behind her shoulders. "Not particularly."

He felt his stomach tighten. His lunch of cheese on toast would look most unpleasant coming back up, he wagered.

"I never wanted this," she continued, seemingly blithely unaware of his inner turmoil, "and it sounds tiresome to me, but I have promised the Queen I would do it for her sake, and the sake of us all."

"Alice," he lisped, hearing the whisper of voices that for many months had been nearly silent now increasing in volume. She never wanted you. She had no choice at all. She would be at home Above if she could. You can't make her happy!

"You know I don't care to be queen," she said, attempting to fluff up his sorely deflated bowtie. "I never wanted that."

He shook his head up and down more than was necessary, reassured to remember that Alice only dreaded being a queen, not his wife. They would not be separated again. "Mother of Underland," he murmured in relief under his breath.

"What's that, Hatter dear?" she asked, as she finished her ministrations with a satisfied smile.

He breathed deeply. Her little endearment and care for his appearance did as much to soothe him as the clarification—being Queen was a tiresome prospect, not his wife. "It is Mirana's wish for you to be queen?" he asked with the brightness of his tone returning somewhat.

"Yes."

She looked as if there were more words to say, but they refused to spill out. That pretty mouth of hers promptly shut and put an end to all speech. Something niggled his brain, warning him that something Bad was afoot. Quiet, you. There was nothing to fear.
"Shall there be a party?" he giggled. "I do love a party, you know."

"There will be at the end of it all, I suppose, but not until after I travel the chessboard of Underland and reach the eighth square."

"How long will that take?" Time being who he was, it was best to be Specific.

"I haven't a clue."

He hummed and gestured towards a stack of hats, brows knitting in hesitation. "I suppose I can put aside my work for the time being. Surely the Queen will understand that you will need an escort and forgive the delay in production. Do you reckon I'll need to shine up the Hightopp claymore? It is dreadfully heavy to lug about, what with all the buttons I will need with me for emergencies filling my pack. Oh dear," he bemoaned, as he pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat to take stock of the timing of this journey. "I will be dreadfully behind before it is all said and done: with the coronation there will be more hat requests than I am accustomed to, no doubt. But, never mind, Duties to Alice come first."

"You can focus on filling hat requests. It is a path you travel without companions."

His heart skipped, once, twice. "Who says?" Who would attempt to keep the pair of them apart? Why, we are a Pair for the Ages! Did they not know it was virtually impossible to part them?

"Mirana, my dear. It has to be me alone, I'm afraid."

He shook his head, his voice growing rough, "Oh, Alice: don't say you're afraid, for if you are afraid, I shall lose all nerve." And while Alice was a lass that Understood his spirit and had forgiven him countless times when he had gone to Pieces, he rather preferred to preserve his masculine dignity as best he could when he possibly could.

"No need for that," she promised him. "It won't be a long trip. You and I will be back together in this little home of ours together again soon enough."

It would be better with her husband at her side. It would be safer, despite Alice being rather Fearsome all by her lonesome. A most apropos word, that: less lonely. Together was never lonely. Together was not to be, however, if Mirana was to be believed. He felt Suspicion lodge in his chest, although he chided it for taking up residence there: She is my Queen! It might be treasonous, but he doubted his monarch and he worried for his dear wife. "It could be dangerous," he lisped, pressing his hand over her middle.

He was thankful Alice had been kind enough not to dwell on the fact that he had urged her to do this some time ago—take up the crown once more! He had warned her that if she let too much Time pass, she would have to begin at Square One to claim the crown. No, there was no use reminding him of it, for their circumstances had changed in the meantime.

"No…I don't think so," Alice responded uncertainly.

One never knew in Underland, but she had not been born here and sometimes needed reminding—despite having witnessed some of its choicest horrors firsthand—that beneath the now tranquil surface could still lurk unpleasant things.

"Mirana assure me it won't be."

His words tumbled out, quickened by concern, "Perhaps you should tell the Queen about the wee bairn. Botheration, I don't know what to think. My thoughts are all a jumble. If you have it, you
want to share it, but if you share it, you don't have it."[4] Perhaps this Secret could also become a Bad Thing and Tarrant wanted nothing more to do with Bad Secrets.

Alice shook her head, 'no'. "It is too early," she said simply.

It may have been her intention to prevent him from feeling anxious by saying no more, but he knew the reason for Secrecy: this early on, things could happen quite easily. There could be a babbie one day and the next day none. His nerves were winding tightly at the thought, the nightmarish thought. He had already lost his family once; he could not bear to have it happen again. He blinked, staring at her middle, where his hand still lay, instead of meeting her gaze. His eyes were shifting slowly into yellow, despite her measured words, as he imagined the empty, hollow, helpless feeling that would sit in his chest if Something Happened.

"I just don't want it to be too late, Alice."

"I'll be very careful," she promised, laying her own hand over his. "Will you support me in this?"

"Of course, Alice. In everything," he promised, slipping his arms around her. "Alice," he whispered, his hands scrambling against her back to fit her more tightly against him. One hand found her temple and a thimble caught in the fine hairs there. Tipping her head back until her neck was exposed to him, he pressed a kiss to her thundering pulse. Her brown eyes were dark with arousal—a look he knew well. It might be that she had been set aflame by his touch and the feel of his breath against her, or perhaps Lust and Fear were strangely related. His lips moved against her skin, marking a path as he kissed and murmured:

"I plunged in the stream, and I drew
My queen from the clasp of the water;
I crowned her with roses and blue,
With yellow and lilies anew;
I called her my love and Above's daughter!"[5]

Lately Alice's thoughts strayed to their marriage bed more often than not despite her fatigue, a fact he could not find fault with, as the knowledge that she was carrying his child was unexpectedly exciting.

"I'm not leaving yet," she reminded him, nudging his head until his lips met her own in a brief kiss.

It seemed as if she wanted to forget her worries for the moment or help him forget his. It would not take much convincing to pull him to their bed. To be fair, Alice never had to employ much Convincing.

She found his hand and linked it in hers, drawing him back. "And as of yet I'm still only your queen."

"Aye, ma Summer Queen."

"Just Plain Alice," she corrected, rubbing her thumb over his stained knuckles. "Come help me forget all the rest." She paused, unbuttoning the first mother of pearl button at her throat, as her gaze fixed on the rise and fall of his chest. "Unless you would rather work on your haberdashery."

His smile was practically predatory. "Och na, lass," he growled, "the hats can bide for a speal."

[1] In Through the Looking-Glass, the Daisy, Rose, and Tiger-lily are all listed as pawns, some white and some red.
[2] Gilding the lily is a saying that dates from Shakespeare's *King John* (1595).

[3] The symbol described is called the Seed of Life and can be found in various cultures throughout history with different symbolism attached to it.


[5] This verse is taken from "The May Queen" by Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), an English occultist, ceremonial magician, and mystic, who also had success in the fields of poetry and chess. It has been alleged that he was a spy for the British government. I have changed one word of this verse. The last line of this verse originally read: "I called her my love and God's daughter!"
Queen o' the May Chapter Three

Chapter Three

Although she had solemnly promised to become a queen, Alice had read through *The Lost Book of Underland* seven times not for her own amusement but for verification that the path ahead of her was unavoidable. But the words in the tome seemed regrettably clear: Underland needed another queen, needed several new monarchs in fact. She had no doubt that if the *Oraculum* was consulted, it would illustrate that it was her destiny to take up the crown—to become the second queen of Underland and save Mirana from madness.

Her only consolation was that she would make her own path as a queen of Underland—how she went about it would be entirely up to her own Discretion. It need not involve heavy gowns and jeweled crowns. It need not involve porters and pawns. It need not change her life with her husband or change their future hopes for their family. Much.

So, resigned to her Fate, she had parted from her husband after a profusion of kisses that cats and dormice alike would have found Revolting and set out on her journey, still carrying their Secret.

Alice adjusted the pack on her back, full of odds and ends Tarrant considered essential for her trip: a bag of corn, cheese, a canteen for water, twine, three blue ribbons, a change of socks, a book of poetry, a pad for sketching, an odd padded contraption for her head, and an elaborately engraved horn. Having great faith in her husband's uncanny forethought, she trusted that she would find use for all of it, although some of them outwardly seemed odd items to select for her journey. He had also seen to her travelling costume. White, as a representative of the White Queen, but simple enough in knickers and shirt, as she was just a Pawn. He had wanted her to carry a pike to suit her role and provide for her protection, but she insisted that hers was a peaceful trip and she would have no need for pikes, swords, or knives—except for cutting the cheese that he had packed for her.[1]

It was clear that Tarrant hoped she would be right about the peaceful nature of her trip as opposed to believing it entirely. He had reminded her mournfully, 'I was a Pawn once. You never want to be a Pawn in the game.'[2] But, she had brushed off his concern while accepting his thoughtful packing assistance.

Looking out over the terrain, she still could not see the squares, but she had been assured by the Queen that she was starting at the second square, a place she could not recall ever having seen before. In order to ascertain whether she was truly in the right place, she looked about. Upon spying a man who looked somewhat official, leaning up against a tree in the distance, she considered him worthy of query and set forth to speak with him.

"Excuse me? Halloo!" she called towards him, cupping her hand to her mouth.

The man pulled something from his pocket, which appeared to be a telescope, and pointed it in her direction. Before she had reached him, he had switched the telescope for a microscope and then again for an opera glass. Alice could tell by the gentleman's grey uniform that he was a guard of
And you are here, I suppose, to defile the place even further," he grumbled as she stopped before him. "This was all once quite grand, quite a marvel of modern efficiency. But they all come to defile."

If it had once been a grand place, there was no evidence of that now—just a grassy expanse and bare patches of earth stretching through the forest—but Alice knew better than to Quibble. "No, I'm here to advance to the next square."

The man looked her up and down through the opera glass before tucking it away in his breast pocket and assessing her with great Imperiousness. "Only one square? I'd jump two if I were you, but then, I'm not. I'm me, which is eminently preferable."

"Can I take two squares at once?"

He frowned at her. "What kind of Pawn are you?"

"A new one," she confessed. Her knowledge about her post was incomplete at best, but if she could skip a square, she would happily do so. After all, she was eager to proceed to the eighth square as quickly as possible. Back home, back to Tarrant.

"Yes, you can jump two squares, though it would have been easier to do so before She had the tracks torn up."

Alice was familiar enough with the tone he employed to know to whom 'she' referred.

"I was very good at collecting tickets," he complained, folding his arms across his chest.

"I'm sure you were," she agreed sympathetically.

"But She didn't just take the tracks. She sunk the engine in the Crimson Sea and took the heads of half my passengers for meaningless crimes. 'Locomotion spread loquaciousness,' she said, and she despised loquaciousness. She disliked just about everything." He narrowed his eyes at her, "You're not Her Pawn, are you?"

"No, sir." She gestured to her clothes, "White Queen, as you see."

"If you happen to have two. Not everyone does," she retorted.

Alice shifted on her feet. She liked to be helpful, but she was wary about promising things to strangers. In her experience, the people of Underland could make rather enormous requests. However, she doubted she would get through this process without relying on some of the residents of Underland and repaying them in kind. It would do no harm to at least inquire. "What can I help you with, sir?"

"If Underland had a train again, if the tracks were re-laid, I would have tickets to collect and passengers to transport across these squares. It has been a great transportational loss, you understand. So, you might speak with the White Queen on it for me, for Underland."

She sighed with relief, "Yes, I can certainly do that." That was no great thing. In fact, it occurred to her that someday she might be able to aid the people of Underland in a similar fashion if she
was really to be a queen here. Perhaps being Queen Alice could have its advantages, even though she had initially been so reluctant to take the crown. It reminded her that being a monarch was supposed to be about serving the people and not entirely about uncomfortable gowns and tedious balls and fawning courtiers.

"What will it be then, White Queen's Pawn: two squares or one?" he inquired.

"Two."

He pointed up into the tree's spreading branches. "You'll find the help you need above. You can glide over the two squares."

"Glide?" she repeated, peering up through the branches.

The man knocked on the trunk of the tall tree, and immediately Alice could hear something moving amongst the broad, leathery leaves overhead. As she continued to gaze up, a rope and wood ladder lowered through the branches.

"I'm to climb up and...glide across?" That did not sound particularly safe, as she had no practice in gliding.

A woolly, brown face with fat cheeks peeked through the leaves, blinking round, black eyes at her. "If you would rather hoof it on those stumps of yours," the creature griped, "I can spare myself the trouble. Thank you very much."

Alice considered it Rude of this creature to speak of her legs in such a manner, but she did not think it worth aggravating the animal any further by saying so. "Well..." she hedged, "I'm only concerned about falling." It could be a great Adventure, but she could not currently afford to be carelessly adventurous for the time being.

The man shook his head, "That is a ridiculous concern. He would be a Falling Squirrel and not a Flying Squirrel if he sent his passengers falling to the ground. Wouldn't you say?"

That was Underlandian logic if she had ever heard it. "Why...yes, I..."

"Hurry up," the Squirrel demanded, withdrawing into the upper reaches of the tree after giving the ladder an impatient shake.

"You'll remember about the train, won't you?" the man asked, as she tentatively grasped the smooth rungs.

Surely this man would not recommend a treacherous mode of travel, when he was counting on her to speak with the Queen on his behalf, Alice reasoned. "Certainly, sir. I shall be sure to mention it," she promised, "and tell her of the kindness you showed me."

He watched her, as she stood motionless with the ladder in hand, despite her intention to take the Squirrel up on his offer. She could not help wondering: was this entirely mad?

Clearing his throat, he asked, "Do you need a boost?"

"No, I can manage," she said, summoning her resolve and placing a foot on the first rung.

As she climbed carefully into the treetop, she whispered repeatedly, "I slew the Jabberwocky, I can do anything." Gliding across two squares of Underland barely even ranked as an Impossible Thing, after all. Only, now she had a baby to worry about, which made this Barely Impossible thing sound Potentially Reckless.
When she reached the top, the Squirrel was waiting upon a platform and his twitching whiskers made her suspect he was eager to get going. Nevertheless, she was hesitant, being unclear as to how they were to travel safely, and her palms were sweaty as a result. Tarrant would never forgive her if she let something happen to herself. He would go quite mad, and she could not have that.

Quickly scanning the platform and Squirrel, she could now see that he was wearing a leather halter that no doubt helped to anchor his riders to his back.

"Climb on, please," he instructed, as he moved towards the edge of the platform.

Alice paused, looking out over the green tree line. She fancied she could see almost the whole of Underland. Moreover, she could finally make out the chessboard the White Queen had assured her was beneath their feet: six rows of squares alternating in light and dark stretched before her in a checkerboard.

The visual proof that she was frighteningly high did very little to quiet her fears. If she could only see their little house…

"One moment," she said, pulling the pack from her back and digging for the padded leather helmet, she had thought a curiosity only a few moments earlier, when considering the contents of her pack. She had laughed when Tarrant had made it for her, but now her husband's curious headgear was about to come in handy, even if she suspected it would look rather silly upon her head. Her dear, thoughtful husband, seeing to her care even from afar—it was nearly as good as a glimpse of their home.

The Squirrel looked askance at her, evidently scornful of her precautionary methods. He made a chattering noise before speaking, "This is a perfectly safe method of travel. Quite the only way I would ever travel."

*It would be quite Odd if a Flying Squirrel skipped or swam,* Alice mused. It was perfectly reasonable for this creature to prefer gliding over other forms of travel, but not as reasonable for an Alice to glide. "Yes, but I might be a great deal heavier than you are accustomed," she explained, as she latched the helmet's strap below her chin.

"Don't presume to know what I am accustomed to," the Squirrel grumbled, even as she climbed atop his back. "Besides, the good news for you, Pawn, is that I can't travel backward."

Alice did not know why that should be good news, but she did not bother to question him about it.[5] She intended on getting this over with so that she might move on to the fourth square post haste. Too much of the day had already passed: the sun was low enough in the sky that she thought she might reach out and touch it from her current potion.

Balancing atop the animal, she grasped the leather halter in her hands. "Am I heavy?"

"As heavy as a rock."

And then they were gliding.

…

Having safely and successfully reached the fourth square, Alice stood before two wooden signs in the shape of fingers pointing in the same direction, one pronouncing 'TO TWEEDLEDUM'S HOUSE' and the other 'TO THE HOUSE OF TWEEDLEDEE.'
Alice could not recall ever having visited the Tweedles' house nor being aware of their even having one, and she was in high spirits at the prospect of meeting with familiar faces, so she moved with renewed energy in the direction the fingers pointed her.

Before she ever reached a house, however, she saw the pair of them standing in the road, and the closer she got, the more she could make out their Raucous Recitation:

"KING LEIR once rulèd in this land
With princely power and peace,
And had all things with hearts content,
That might his joys increase.
Amongst those things that nature gave,
Three daughters fair had he,
So princely seeming beautiful,
As fairer could not be."

"Tweedles!" she called to them, raising her hand to wave at them enthusiastically.

The boys paused, turning to greet her with mirrored waves. "Hello, Alice." "Alice, hello."

"Hello, boys. I didn't think to meet with you."

"We didn't think to meet with you either," Dee said, waddling a few feet towards her.

"Contrariwise, I specifically said I thought we might meet with the Alice," Dum contradicted.

Dee pouted at his brother, but seemingly eager to continue with their recitation, he asked her, "Do you like poetry?"

"Ye-es. Well, it depends really. What were you reciting?" she inquired, taking a seat upon an unassuming stump, although telling the different between an Unassuming and an Assuming stump in Underland could be quite difficult. When it did not shriek, she knew she had chosen well.

Dee spoke first: "A ballad."

"King Leir and his Three Daughters."

"That being the same. 'King Leir' is a ballad."

"But not all ballads are 'King Leir'."

Alice dug in her pack. "Would you like some cheese?" she asked, attempting to put an end to their bickering. That and the weak cheese Tarrant had packed did not make her empty stomach queasy.

The boys nodded enthusiastically. They were hardy eaters and took several more short waddling steps forward to eagerly receive her proffered nibbles. She carved the cheese into several chunks and held out the pieces to them.

She would have liked to ask them whether they had news from court, news of her Hatter, but this far from Marmoreal they were unlikely to have any more news than she did. It had only been a day, she reminded herself somewhat sullenly. It was only the prospect of several days like this and the crowning at the end that weighed her down. It was only the magic of Underland urging her to be of one mind and be of one path with her husband who was necessarily separated from her. It would not do to feel sorry for herself, however. She would be with her husband again soon enough.
She smiled up at them, attempting to turn her mood upside down, though she felt like frowning. "I didn't know you boys lived out here." Wherever Here was.

"Lived."

"Not live."

"In the past."

"Not presently."

"No?" Alice mumbled around a mouthful of cheese. "Why not?"

"It's not safe."

"It hasn't been safe."

"But the Red Queen's gone," she reminded them. It was not that Underland suddenly was without dangers, but until recently Alice had rarely been called to court as an advisor to the Queen for anything more than Grumblers and Petty Thieves. Underland had largely been made safe.

"It wasn't She that made it unsafe."

"Contrariwise, She made everything unsafe. It might have been Her creature."

"But we don't know that."

"Can't be sure."

"What creature?" she asked.

"An enormous crow. Black as a tar barrel."

"Nohow. Not enormous. It was monstrous huge."

"That being the same thing."

Alice looked up into the clear blue sky. "Have you seen it since?" Since the Other One was exiled, she meant.

"We hadn't thought to check."

Dum shook his head, having swallowed his last bite. "No, no. We did think to check. That's why we're here."

"Nohow. We came to look for my rattle!"

"It is my rattle!"

"It's mine and you broke it!"

She interrupted what seemed to be developing into a rather disagreeable disagreement, as both Dee and Dum were beginning to grow frightfully red in the face, "Are you going to finish the ballad? It sounded very promising."

The interruption had the desired effect: both boys gave her their attention, their irritation with each other diminishing in their eagerness to share their recitation.
"You want it finished?"

"Or do you want it begun?"

Alice tucked away her sack. "You have already begun it, have you not?"

"But we haven't reached the end."

"There is the middle to be considered."

She was tired. Indeed, she had been more tired of late than usual, and the day had been long. The ballad might put an end to their bickering, but she did not truly want to hear the whole of 'King Leir', even if it was an Uncommonly Good ballad. "Is it terribly long?"

"Terribly."

"Contrariwise, it's horribly long."

Alice rubbed her forehead briskly, hoping to stave off a headache. "What part is the best part of 'King Leir'?"

"The best is the end," Dee asserted.

"The ending is best," Dum agreed.

"Then begin at the end," she urged them, crossing her ankles and leaning back on her hands.

"Only it is frightfully sad."

"Dreadfully sad."

The Tweedles were not usually given to sharing sad stories: they were cheerful boys if a tab bit argumentative. That they were reciting such a story surprised her. "I'm duly warned, I suppose. Only, why is the King's story so sad?"

"Because it ends in death."

"Death for all."

"King Leir and his daughters."

Alice frowned, "That does sound sad. And yet you think it's the best part?"

The boys only nodded emphatically before bursting into their recitation once more.

"But when he heard Cordelia's death, Who died indeed for love Of her dear father, in whose cause She did this battle move, He swooning fell upon her breast, From whence he never parted; But on her bosom left his life That was so truly hearted.

The lords and nobles, when they saw The end of these events,
The other sisters unto death
They doomèd by consents;
And being dead, their crowns they left
Unto the next of kin:
Thus have you seen the fall of pride,
And disobedient sin."[6]

Alice frowned. Having only heard the ending of the ballad, 'King Leir' did not make much sense to her. A consequence she should have predicted. "Who was King Leir?"

"A dead man."

"She means to say prior to his being dead," Dum said, giving his brother a slight elbow to the ribs.

"Oh. Red then."

"Red King," Dum agreed with a nod.

"Wasn't he a lovely sight?" Dee asked Dum with evident sadness contorting his rounded face.

"Lovely and red, but very sleepy."

"A great snorer."

"I once thought that he was dreaming us all, but that can't be true now."

"Couldn't be true, he being dead."

"Iracebeth's king?" His head had bobbed in the castle's moat along with many others, Alice knew.

"Oh no! The Red King that Was."

Furrowing her brow, Alice shook her head, confused.

Dee smiled at her as if she was somewhat slow. "She was not the Red Queen to begin with."

Dum looked similarly sympathetic about her ignorance. "Though she ended as it."

"Who was Iracebeth to begin with then?" she pressed, wondering if these boys were capable of explaining themselves entirely.

"Queen of Hearts."

"Princess of the White," Dum corrected.

"That ain't what she meant, and you know it," Dee grumbled.

"She married the King of Hearts then?" Alice wagered.

"Precisely." "Exactly."

So it was the King of Hearts' head that floated amongst the rest. "But the Red King died as well?" she asked, as a chill stole over her. Has the grove grown colder?

Both boys gestured to their throats, drawing their index fingers across their wide necks menacingly, as they intoned darkly, for once in unison, "And his daughters fair."
Dum whispered, "Important types were convinced of the necessity that the two that lived should live no more."

"Necessary it was, so they said," Dee said with a nod.

"And that left the Red throne empty?" she asked.

"Yes," they replied once more in unison.

Alice suddenly felt terribly uneasy. "Who was the next of kin who took their thrones?"

They whispered their overlapping answers so quietly she could barely make them out. "Her." "The Other One."

"She sat both thrones then and took the higher title of Red," Alice reasoned aloud. She wondered if that was when the madness had begun.

A large shadow fell across the valley floor, causing both of the boys to nervously look towards the sky.

"Time to go, Alice."

"Alice, go we must."

She shook her head, "No, I can't go back. It appears that I must keep going forward." She had attempted to retrace her steps some time earlier, thinking she had strayed from the Proper Path, but her boots had refused to turn back.

"We shouldn't have mentioned the Red King or Her."

"It was you that did it, not me."

The boys wrung their chubby little hands. "Dark words, dark deeds." "Dark deeds, dark words."

"I'm brave generally, Alice. But today I have a headache," Dee apologized, as the boys took each others' hands and began backing away.

"My head hurts much worse than yours—I'm suffering from a terrible toothache," Dum whined.

She wanted to promise to protect them from whatever cast the shadow, like the Champion she knew herself to be would do, but she had not taken the pike with her on this journey. Perhaps, she thought with regret, she should have taken it like Tarrant had wanted. Even a dagger would suit.

"Wait," she said, stretching out a hand as they began to waddle backwards. "May I sleep the night in your house?"

"Our turret?" "The tower?"[7]

"Yes, may I?"

She had no choice but to take their squeals as they turned and ran as an affirmative, as she was beginning to suspect that sleeping out in the open air might not be as safe as she would like it to be. Not everything evil had departed Underland with the exiling of the Queen of Hearts and her Knave. So, intent on finding cover and a place to rest her weary body, she slung her pack over her shoulder, looking to the sky before she began the rest of the hike to the Tweedles' abode.

…
Hatter had taken a break from his hats to putter around the garden and imagine Alice beside him putting the seeds to bed, when the sky grew dark and the air suddenly cold, chasing him inside. Shucking his shoes into the corner with a tumble of hard leather against wood, he slumped onto the bed and stared around what had once been his bedchamber, but was now theirs. The process of it becoming theirs had been the greatest improvement this little room had ever seen, but now it barely looked familiar. Instead of a lively painted ceiling, wide, warm wooden plank floors, and colorful quilts, he looked around and felt as if he was on the inside of a cold stone tower. Most incommodious. Most unfamiliar. Completely devoid of Alice.

Any room could be vastly improved with Alice, and this room suffered mightily from the loss.

It was oh so much more than that, however. So much so that he began to wonder if his eyes were playing tricks on him. For unless he had unknowingly wandered where he ought not, this was their home and their bedchamber and there was no way it could have become stone in the meantime. Rubbing roughly at his eyes with his fists did nothing to dissolve the illusion, however.

"Botheration," he grumbled to No One, his voice echoing off the walls uncharacteristically.

Normally he would blame the Madness, but he did not feel Mad exactly. It was merely as if he was in someone else's shoes—or stockings to be precise, as he had just removed his shoes. Alice might be absent, but his manners need not be: dusty sheets would be a most unwelcome surprise upon his wife's return, so shoes and sheets must not meet.

Throwing himself back into the quilts on their bed, he turned his head into the pillow, which did not even properly smell of Alice. It had only been one day, so he could not understand the lack, but the prospect of spending a night in this fractured reality worried him more. How can I sleep when the pillow doesn't smell of Alice? He had grown accustomed to being able to turn and look upon her fair face with her blonde locks spilled across the goose down pillow whenever dreams disturbed his sleep and he awoke with his heart in his throat. Taking in the sight of her, drinking in her Aliceness, he no longer needed to rouse her and seek her solace, grasping her to him in a panicked attempt to fuse their bodies together. No, just having her pressed alongside him was enough now to slow his pulse and clear the cobwebs.

But she would not be there tonight. She and the babbie were elsewhere, and he could hear neither of their voices.

Squeezing his eyes shut tight, he began to hum a tune he could not name, attempting to sing himself to sleep. A Plan he knew was fraught with difficulties given his miserable singing voice. But what else was he to do?

Humming louder to drown out his Doubts, he chanted inwardly: Seven kingdoms, seven thrones.

He had seen the book. He knew what was at stake, and it was a momentous thing.

One sleepless hatter on the other hand was a very small thing.

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[1] Pawns are the weakest piece in chess. They are meant to represent the infantry, more specifically pikemen.

[2] In the dramatis personae for Through the Looking Glass, Hatter is listed as a white pawn.

[3] Pawns are differentiated by the files upon which they stand. The queen pawn stands on the d-file.

[4] Pawns can generally only move one square, except in their first move, where they can move
two squares.


[6] King Leir and his Three Daughters is an old English ballad.

[7] The Tweedles are white rooks—Dee is the White Queen’s rook and Dum the King’s. The rook in chess is represented in the west as a crenellated turret or siege tower.
Chapter Four

The morning had come and gone as she walked across the fourth square, but Alice felt certain she was making good progress when she saw a change of light across a brook that wended before her. It seemed to her that the light on the one side and the dark on the other indicated the transition from the fourth to the fifth square. Her forward progress was slowed, however, as the brook looked too wide and deep to ford on foot. So, Alice made her way north along the brook, her boots crunching in the pebbles underfoot as she looked for a place where it might be crossable.

As she walked along the bank she did not encounter a bridge or a ferry for some time, but to her great surprise, she eventually came upon an elaborately draped white tent from which music seemed to be floating on the breeze. At first she believed her eyes must be deceiving her due to fatigue. She was not as well rested as she would like, having slept fitfully: she had become too accustomed to the breathing of her husband on the pillow next to hers to sleep properly without it, and the Tweedles' tower had been too cold, too bare, and smelled all wrong.

But would her Ears deceive her as well? The tinny sound of the chorus from "Sailing, Sailing" distinctly echoed from behind the canvas walls of the tent.

"Sailing, sailing over the bounding main
Where many a story wind shall blow
'Ere Jack comes home again."[1]

There was no one standing guard before the tent, and therefore, Alice pulled aside a flap to peer within. The White Queen sat upon a camp throne, her white crown upon her head and her hands floating at shoulder height, as a phonograph played.

"Hello, Alice," Mirana intoned, her blackened lips spreading into a smile.

Alice glanced about the tent. The Queen was here entirely alone, and this far from the palace Alice would have expected for her to be accompanied by a large contingent of sentries, pages, and courtiers. Mirana's unexpected solitude caught Alice off guard and she did not immediately respond to her majesty's greeting.

"What pray are you doing here, my dear?"

"Me?" Alice croaked, her voice having not yet been used that day.

Mirana leaned to the left, attempting to see around Alice. "Is someone standing behind you?"

"No."

"Well then, I imagine I meant to address you, for we two are alone. Are we not? Just the two of us—one, two?"
Mirana's insistence on this point set Alice's teeth on edge. It almost seemed as if the entire world suspected something—suspected that Alice and Tarrant were about to become three. "Ah, yes. I'm sorry," she replied stepping forward and letting the tent flap fall closed behind her.

"Yes you are a sorry creature, but what are you doing here?"

More Rudeness, Alice was sorry to see, but she swallowed her bile. "I'm making my way to the fifth square."

"The fifth square?"

"Yes...on the errand you sent me?"

"Ah, yes, I quite forgot," the Queen blinked. "I can be terribly forgetful. After one lives for more than a hundred years, there is a good deal to be forgot—good and bad. But I won't forget my manners. Would you like some jam?" she asked, gesturing airily towards the table, which was spread with edibles and drinkables and the phonograph.[2]

"Today?" Alice responded, shocked to be offered jam today and shocked by the Queen's avowal of being over one hundred. She was not sure she should believe anything the Queen said presently.

"No, not today. Never today," Mirana said with a quick shake of the head. "How ever would we manage that? How silly, Alice. I only meant to ask if you would presently like some. You might very well like jam, but that doesn't mean you can have any."

"It's all right. I am not actually in need of anything." That was not entirely true: she would not mind a cup of her husband's tea. She wondered if the baby wished for some as well, but Tarrant was not here to ask the bairn, let alone brew the tea.

"What can I do for you then, Alice?"

"I suppose you might tell me what you are doing along the bank here?" Alice inquired, still befuddled by the Queen's mysterious appearance along her path. She had not mentioned that she might check in on her Champion's progress across the squares of Underland.

"I can't recall," Mirana responded without sounding as if that bothered her in the least. "But I'm very glad to have happened to be in your way. Have a seat, my dear."

Alice sat in the only other chair, brushing off the seat of her knickers with an apologetic grimace. Her boots were also likely to leave dust upon the white, temporary floor of the tent, as she had done a poor job of keeping her colorless attire as pristine as she ought. Tarrant often scoffed at her Carelessness with Clothing, but then, her mother had done the same.

He was never far from her mind, so she ventured to ask after her husband. "Have you seen the Hatter?"

"No, he had not come to court before I left. He is buried up to his neck in headgear," Mirana explained, lifting her chin with the fingertips on her upturned hands, as if she was holding her own head above a rising sea of headgear, before adding, "according to the Dormouse."

It made her feel more at ease to know that Mally had checked upon Tarrant. The Dormouse knew how to deal with his Madness if necessary, having fulfilled that position for years until Alice's return to Underland.

"He's eager to keep up with requests," Alice said. For a moment she pictured his preternaturally
quick hands working over his materials, crafting something beautiful and fantastical. He already had plans for two dozen baby bonnets. Their Secret had necessarily delayed the creation of said bonnets, but it did not stop him from sketching them and talking about them endlessly. Theirs would be an exceptionally well hatted baby she had no doubt.

"Oh yes, you're both most loyal, most conscientious in your work," Mirana beamed, smoothing back her long white tresses. "How goes your errand?"

"Well enough. I suppose I am nigh on halfway finished, although my first move was over two squares, so my pace is somewhat deceptive. The going in slower now. And I have met some of your subjects."

"Charming," the Queen said, pressing her hands together. "Do tell me. How fair my lambs?"

"I met a ticket taker, although, there are no tickets for him to take. Indeed, he asked me to speak to you about his predicament…"

Mirana interrupted, leaning forward in her camp throne, as her hands gripped the arms so tightly that her knuckles turned whiter than Alice had thought possible, "Was he a Grumbler? I must warn you that I shan't be sheepish any longer about dealing with Grumblers."

"Oh, no," Alice quickly reassured the Queen, who seemed to be tottering on the edge of something wholly Unpleasant. "The Ticket Taker Who Was is presently a most dutiful subject and he did me a great kindness: he is the one who advised me how to cross two squares at once."

Mirana sat back in her throne stiffly, and although she attempted to smile, a muscle merely jumped at the corner of her mouth. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Your…sister had the train tracks torn up. He was a ticket taker. He would like to see the trains restored to Underland, but if you would rather not…” Alice began, meaning to say that she would attempt to rebuild the tracks once she sat one of the thrones of Underland if Mirana did not care to, but she was silenced with a wave of the Queen's hand.

"Another request to be seen to. Very well, since he showed you Kindness, I shall place it at the top of my To Do List. There is a great deal to be Undone that Iracebeth Did."

Alice sighed, "Of course, we all understand that, your Majesty. Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Well, it might have been. You weren't there," Mirana replied a little sharply. But suddenly her face softened. "I quite forgot to ask something else of you before you left court the other day, Alice."

_Something else? _"What would you have me do?"

"Could you make some inquiries after Lily? Amongst these subjects of mine? Someone might know something about her whereabouts."

"I shall try. Who is Lily?"

"My daughter."

Alice was certain that her jaw had been properly attached only a moment ago, but it fell open nonetheless. If it did not promptly close, there was some packaging twine her husband had stuffed in her pack, which would have to be put to an inventive use.

"Your daughter," she parroted back.
"Yes. If I hadn't misplaced her, I would have placed her on the second square, as she was already a Pawn, although rather young to play. She would make a pretty queen of Underland now, I wager. She was a pretty child, after all."

*How does one misplace a child?*

No one had ever spoken of Lily to Alice, not her husband, not Mally or Thackery, nor even Chessur. She had no notion that the White Queen had any children. Did it follow that she had once had a husband as well? She was not willing to risk the Queen's wrath, which seemed to be uncharacteristically boiling beneath the surface, however, by asking such a question.

"You'll want to be on your way," the Queen abruptly said, gesturing towards the tent flap. Alice could tell it was a command by the tone of her voice. "Cross the brook by way of the row boat. You'll find yourself at the fifth rank. Do be quick about it." The Queen looked down at the ground and mumbled something, as she tapped on her lips with one long graceful finger. It sounded remarkably like *buttered fingers* to Alice.

Stumbling to her feet, she began to back out of the tent. "I'll do my best, your Majesty."

…

His knitting needles clicked together as Tarrant worked at the scarf meant to match the hat he had only just finished. He wanted very much to make Small hats and scarves and mittens and booties, but he knew that would spoil the Secret, so he satisfied himself with filling orders at lightening fast speed. Too much of it was boringly white, but this hat and scarf combination was a rainbow of colors intended for the Mock Turtle. His neck was rather short, making Tarrant wonder how much of a scarf he really needed, but it was not his job to Judge orders, only fill them.

"Are you comin'?" Mally asked, stabbing the table piled high with unfinished bits and bobbins with the end of her hatpin sword.

"Yes, of course I am. I wouldn't miss it."

Nodding towards one rather plain hat, the Dormouse offered her opinion rather bluntly, "That 'at wants somethin'."

"It does indeed," Tarrant agreed. "It wants feathers." Blue would be nice but if he added them, they would have to be white like the rest of it.

"Don't even think about fixin' it now though," she advised. "I'm supposed to hurry you along."

"You're doing a Marvelous job," Tarrant smiled, his needles continuing to click and clack, knowing that everyone enjoys a Compliment, particularly Dormice.

Mally's tail swished sharply. "Are you goin' to make us late? I'll stick ye if I must."

Tarrant would have pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat in order to make a Proper Determination, but it would have necessitated putting down his knitting, which he very much wanted to finish before following the Dormouse to the Windmill House or before he fell asleep where he sat. His sleepless night without Alice had admittedly left him fighting sleep all day. Not with swords, but with knitting needles and napping combs and bow-pins.

"Alice is always late." He bit his lip: his mind was so full of Alice and the babbie that the words were beginning to threaten to spill out his ears. Just yesterday when Mally had checked in on him, he was certain he had mumbled her name one too many times to be safe, and now he had been
about to ask whether Mally imagined Little Alice would tend towards lateness as well. Nine
months and countless years was long enough to wait for a bairn: he did not think he could wait
any longer.

"Nivens will be there, you know. We shouldn't be late," Mally continued, ignoring his
observation.

The Rabbit imagined himself a mite more important than he really was, and Tarrant was of the
opinion that he could occasionally use a reminder that their lives were not all set to his watch.
"Nivens can wait."

"Perhaps so, but can Thackery?" she asked with a significant twitch of her nose.

No, Thackery was a very bad Waiter. He cracked teacups, tossed scones, and got orders woefully
confused. He was, however, an excellent Concocter of Edibles. He sighed. "What has Thackery
made for dinner?" He had barely paused to eat today, being occupied with making hats and
pacing the room in an attempt to cover as much distance as possible. It had left him feeling rather
peckish.

"Crab."

He went on knitting, even though crab sounded rather tempting. Quirking a brow, however, when
his stomach gave protest, he paused just long enough to ask, "A little or a lot of crab?"

"A lot."

"Anything else?" he asked, his needles finally slowing as he pondered steamed crab claws and
melted butter.

"Crab and all sorts of things. You know very well he'll make whatever you want. Plenty of
choices, only make up your mind to join us," Mally insisted.[4] "And make it up quick: we don't
have much Time."

It was true. One never had enough Time, and it would not do to spend another evening at his hats
without indulging in a meal to fortify himself, particularly if he was doomed to spend another
sleepless night without His Alice.

Tarrant put the scarf down, pushing it away from himself. "Very well: I'll come. I'm in the mood
for poached eggs, and Thackery does make such an impressive poached egg."

…

It had been a struggle to work the oars on the rowboat that she found floating in the brook when
she emerged from the tent, but eventually Alice found herself on the opposite bank and began her
march across yet another of Underland's squares. It felt a great deal longer than the last. Either
Time was playing tricks or the Queen's dark words and revelations were weighing upon her. Alice
knew not which.

And she was lonely. It was not wholly Underland's fault, but she frowned up into the sky
nonetheless, blaming it for making her feel so drawn to her husband and for taking her on this path
alone. One grey cloud in a sea of white glowered right back at her. Underland cared not that its
plans for her brought her or its hatter pain. It could be a cruel mistress. Wise though. Having
Hatter for her mate was a decision she might have taken years to come to on her own, but
Underland had been wiser and more precipitous in bringing them together.

She tried to remind herself that even without Tarrant at her side, she was never alone now: there
was the bairn. Yet while her body might feel tired and her stomach uneasy, she looked no
different and without her husband there to speak with the baby it did not feel entirely Real.
Instead, she felt lonely, and if she thought of her loneliness, she feared two fat tears would spill
down her cheeks. Alice did not like to cry and did not particularly like how often she recently felt
like crying. But she had left her husband behind to perform this errand for the Queen, who seemed
increasingly to be suffering from a marble deficiency, and she needed someone with whom to
confess and share her unease and fear.

She would even settle for a materializing Cat.

But without ever encountering another creature, she reached yet another brook, this time blessedly
easier to cross, and she found herself at the sixth rank. No sooner had she crossed than she found
herself face to face with an enormous egg man sitting atop a mossy stone wall with his legs
crossed beneath him like a Turk.

She knew him from the rhyme, but Tarrant had also once mentioned that he was a citizen of
Underland. She smiled to herself as she peered up at him, saying under her breath:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall:
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty in his place again."[5]

It did not seem as if he was addressing her, when he spoke as he looked towards a neighboring
weeping willow tree, "How very Original. I've never heard That before."

"I wasn't attempting to be original," Alice said with a frown.

"Do you always chatter away to yourself without properly introducing yourself?" Humpty
Dumpty asked, looking down at her at last.

"If I'm talking to no one but myself, there is no one to introduce myself to," she reasoned.

"Oh, I see: you're Contrary."

"No, I'm Alice, Champion of Underland."

He squinted his small blue eyes at her. "I find titles very tiresome, but I suppose you think it makes
you sound Important."

She shook her head, leaning a shoulder against his wall. "Not at all. I was only introducing myself
as you requested."

"You're a queer creature," he responded with pursed lips.

Alice thought the same of him, but having already been accused of being rude and contrary, she
was not going to say so. Besides, she was too concerned by his precarious position to think of
much else. "I do wish you wouldn't sit up there."

"You worry I might fall," he smirked, kicking his feet like a child.

"It would be unpleasant if you did." Without her husband's morning brewed tea to settle her
stomach, she was certain that the sight of Humpty Dumpty cracked upon the ground would make
her violently ill. The very idea of eggs was a little nauseating. Never mind that he seemed a good
enough Egg Man, and she had no wish for him to meet his end. "Surely sitting atop walls in a
forest by one's self is not a useful way to spend one's time."
"You speak as if you own Time. And if you knew him at all, I don't think you'd presume to spend
him, for I don't believe he likes to be Spent in the least. What worth would you wager to arbitrarily
place on him?"

Alice had no answer for that, so she tried again. "May I sit here beneath your wall?" The grass
was quite thick here and she thought it would be a relief to rest for a time. "You won't be alone at
least."

"I can't very well stop you, so you may do as you please. Even if I wanted to chase you off, the
King, I understand, is dead: I can't be taking any chances anymore. Although," he hummed,
peering over the edge at a dangerous angle, "I am sometimes enamored by the thought."

She stopped arranging herself on the bright green turf, horrified by his confession. "Do you mean
to say that you entertain thoughts of…jumping?"

He straightened back up, smirking once more—a tremendous sight with a mouth that large. "I'm
very important, and I would instantly become the Center of Attention. There would be a great deal
of effort made to save me. Or…there would have been."

"Please don't," Alice begged. "Don't even say such things for sport." She was tired from the day's
travels and would like to dose against the wall, which she would not be able to do if she thought
Humpty Dumpty was going to take a fall. She would have to be Champion and spend the night
that was approaching watching him for signs of…

"Is he truly dead?" the Egg asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"The King?"

"Yes. Is he? I had heard that he was, but then, I rarely have visitors, so there are very few people
to confirm the news that reaches me. You're queer, but confirmation is confirmation, I suppose."

"Well, I don't know which king you had the agreement with, but I believe he is. I believe all the
kings are dead," she said, resting her head against the white stones of the wall. The other day she
would have sworn to all the kings of Underland being dead, but she did not feel certain of
anything anymore.

"I held this lovely tower for the Red Queen that Was (not the usurper)," he said, waving a hand
over the wall, "but my agreement was with the White King."[6]

The wall upon which he sat did not look much like a tower to Alice, but she would not comment
on that either. "I'm afraid I didn't even know there was a White King," she admitted.

Humpty Dumpty laughed, "You really don't know anything, do you."

She would have protested, but she had already concluded that she knew a great deal less than she
had once thought.

He paused, his great mouth forming into a monstrous frown, "Unless, you're one of Her
creatures."

"I'm the White Queen's Pawn and Champion. Only, I've let my clothes get dirty, so I am not as
white as I once was."

"Shades of grey," he sighed. "Yes, I can see that. Although, unless you are very dim, you would
think you would know something about the Queen you serve. You might have known the King
"I am from Above," she explained. "I was not in Underland until Gribling Day."

She unlaced her pack, wondering if there was anything inside she might offer her companion, but she could not figure what an egg might eat. *Not boiled eggs, certainly!*

She decided up a drunk and pulled free her canteen. To be polite she offered the Egg Man a drink from it, but he declined. So, unscrewing the top, she took a long drink from it herself, feeling some relief as the cool water ran down her throat.

"You're not The Alice, are you?" he asked, leaning dangerously forward once more.

"Do sit back," she urged him, peering up at his shocked face from the ground. "Yes, I am The Alice," she answered once he seemed more safely seated atop the wall. "I slew the Jabberwocky."

"Of course. I've met you before. We discussed the Jabberwocky poem. And you were just as ill-informed then as you are now."

Sometimes her visits to Underland as a child felt like a dream, sometimes she did not remember aspects of them at all. "I don't recall our meeting, I'm sorry, but I have to remind you that I was only seven and a half at the time."

"That half meant a great deal to you, I suppose," he said scornfully. "But it all comes back to me now. Not your face, but the rest of it. The famous Alice of the poem. We both have poems dedicated to us," he said, sounding mollified by that realization.

Being a creature of prophecy had never meant much to Alice, except that it had brought her many new friends and her Hatter. If it struck the Egg as important, however, it might make him more willing to share information with her. She tested her theory. "Might you tell me what happened to the White King?"

"The White Queen's sister, who stole the Red crown, had my poor benefactor killed, like all the rest," Humpty Dumpty sighed. "Lost his head."

Alice wondered whether this Egg being more head than body had saved him from Iracebeth's penchant for taking them off. He was an oddity, and the Queen had liked to surround herself with oddities. Strange that he had not ended up in Iracebeth's court amongst her faux curiosities.

"You could do with a better head," the Egg mused. "The face you have is terribly forgettable. I wouldn't have ever remembered it, and you won't be gone ten minutes and I'll have forgotten it again."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd rather not leave just yet. It seems to be growing dark and I'd like to rest here." Just for a moment. Just long enough to close her eyes until her body did not feel so weary. "Is it safe to sleep here in the open?"

"Quite. I never see a visitor more than twice a month. And the crow rarely flies this far afield."

She had not forgotten the crow, and she was glad to hear that it did not frequent this neighborhood. "Will you keep a keen eye out for Trouble nonetheless?" She was counting on the notion that Eggs did not need shuteye.

"I will do that and more, Champion Alice. If you like, I shall help send you to the land of dreams, for I have just the sort of poem that might lull you to sleep. A story about the White family, my Royal Protectors."
Tarrant sometimes whispered stories in her ear until she fell asleep, as he had when she first had begun to return to Underland by looking glass travel and share his bed. She had grown uncommonly fond of that method of drifting into unconsciousness. "I'd like that," she said, folding her sack and tucking it behind her neck to create something of a pillow against the hard wall. A story about the White family might inform her better about Lily as well, she mused, as the Egg began to speak.

"KNEEL down, fair Love, and fill thyself with tears,
Girdle thyself with sighing for a girth
Upon the sides of mirth,
Cover thy lips and eyelids, let thine ears
Be filled with rumour of people sorrowing;
Make thee soft raiment out of woven sighs
Upon the flesh to cleave,
Set pains therein and many a grievous thing,
And many sorrows after each his wise
For amlet and for gorget and for sleeve.

O Love's lute heard about the lands of death,
Left hanged upon the trees that were therein;
O Love and Time and Sin,
Three singing mouths that mourn now under breath,
Three lovers, each one evil spoken of…"

*Tears and sorrow and death?* The Egg had a strange notion of pleasant nighttime stories. But the patterns of rhyme and his steady voice were having a soothing effect. A most soothing effect.

"O Sin, thou knowest that all thy shame in her
Was made a goodly thing;
Yea, she caught Shame and shamed him with her kiss,
With her fair kiss, and lips much lovelier
Than lips of amorous roses in late spring."

Alice tried, but she could not open her eyes and she could not open her mouth to interrupt, so that she might ask whether these verses were about Mirana, Iracebeth, or even Lily. It was unclear to her, but she was certain there was some information to be gleamed from these lines.

"By night there stood over against my bed
Queen Venus with a hood striped gold and black,
Both sides drawn fully back
From brows wherein the sad blood failed of red,
And temples drained of purple and full of death…"

Her head bobbed, waking her for the moment, and she realized that she had missed several verses in the meantime. More useful information lost to her. She pinched her wrist, attempting to make herself wakeful enough to hear the rest of his recitation.

"Then I behold, and lo on the other side
My lady's likeness crowned and robed and dead.
Sweet still, but now not red,
Was the shut mouth whereby men lived and died.
And sweet, but emptied of the blood's blue shade,
The great curled eyelids that withheld her eyes…[7]"
Alas, Alice heard no more.

[1] "Sailing, Sailing" (also known by its first line "Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main") is a children's song and sea chantey about sailing on the ocean. It was written in 1880 by Godfrey Marks, a pseudonym of British organist and composer James Frederick Swift (1847–1931).

[2] The White Queen tells Alice that she is over 100 in *Through the Looking-Glass*. She is also a very forgetful creature, owing in part to knowing what is going to happen in the future as opposed to the past.


[4] When Alice is in the rowboat with the knitting Sheep in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Sheep shout about "crabs" and "feathers". Unbeknownst to Alice, these are rowing terms.

[5] The earliest known version of "Humpty Dumpty" is in a manuscript addition to a copy of *Mother Goose's Melody* published in 1803.

[6] Humpty Dumpty is the Red Queen's rook.

[7] These incomplete verses are taken from "A Ballad of Death" by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909).
Chapter Five

Alice was awoken rather unpleasantly by a sharp wrapping upon her head, and she opened her eyes, blinking confusedly in the early morning light. Straightening up, she saw Thackery and Mally standing before her, whiskers atwitter.

"Don't hit 'er with your ladle, Haigha. Hatta said to be careful with the Alice," Mally reminded him grumpily. "You'd think she's as brittle as porcelain the way he carried on about it."

"Peanut brittle," Thackery mumbled apologetically, while dutifully tucking away the ladle and leaning forward with a steaming cup of tea instead.

"No, consider making pralines," Mally suggested. "I prefer it. Don't you?"

"You don't know how happy I am to see you two," Alice smiled, as she took the only slightly chipped teacup from Thackery's shaking paws. She wondered if their pride would be affronted if she gathered them both in her arms. Mally's would be.

"Hatta thought ye might be hungry and thirsty," Thackery said proudly. His pronouncement seemingly reminded him of something and he twitched, digging in his pockets. Finally he procured something square-ish in shape and wrapped in parchment. He placed it with exaggerated care in her lap like an elaborate offering.

"Mmm, buttered bread," she cooed with delight, as she unwrapped the parchment. "How did Tarrant manage to know where I could be found?" she asked, balancing the bread on her knee as she sipped from the cup. "And how is this still so blessedly warm?"

"Everyone is waitin' not far from here, so it was brewed by Hatta and on its way one, two, three, you see. Besides, the Alice, maybe we found ye," Mally griped, scrambling atop Alice's other knee. "Did that never occur to you?"

It had not. Tarrant seemed most skilled in locating her, generally, as if he had developed a seventh sense—his sixth being a sense of fashion, of course. It might have to do with the ritual they had once unknowingly performed, for all she knew, but she had grown accustomed to his uncanny ability to know where she was. So, it had not occurred to her that someone else might have done the locating. She shrugged her shoulders contritely as she sipped.

"All the King's horses and all the King's men," Thackery said, hiccupping.

"We check up on Humpty Dumpty now that there are no official types on horseback to do it proper, for all the good that ever did 'im," Mally explained.

Taking a bite of the buttered white bread, Alice glanced up, remembering the Egg for the first time since rousing. He was not atop the wall, and that realization made Alice mightily afraid to look
around. *Is he splat upon the ground?* She suddenly regretted having fallen asleep.

"He's gone," Mally said, following Alice's gaze.

"Gone?" she echoed, hoping against hope that 'gone' was not a euphemism.

"He's never 'ere when we arrive. It only stands to reason: you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We all must be 'atched or go bad," Mally clarified, although Alice was more confused than ever. [1] "What do you imagine came first: the chicken or the egg?" the Dormouse asked, paws on hips, tail twitching.

That question did not help her perplexity. "Is that solvable?"

"I haven't any notion." Mally's dark eyes twinkled, "Do you imagine it a better riddle than Hatta's?"

Alice looked down her nose at the Dormouse. Mally could be so terribly competitive.

"But I digress," Mally said, waving away Alice's weighty silence, "the Queen thought you might've reached this far in your journey, so we might as well check on the Egg while we were at it."

"And to bring the repast to the dear child, as Hatta wished," Thackery smiled, his eyes pointing in two different directions.

Alice observed the Hare carefully: when had he begun to call her 'dear child'? Or was he even referring to herself? Could it be that he knew?

"And," Mally said cheerfully, "we can walk with you to the fight. The Queen said it would not break any Rules if we did so, it being such a short distance."

"Wait," Alice swallowed, finishing the last of the tea. "What fight?" This did not sound promising. This sounded like something a Champion might be expected to involve herself in, which meant Tarrant would be called upon to step forward. *Wasn't this whole business supposed to put an end to the Queen's desire to put Grumblers to the sword?*

"Where did you think we came from? The first Lion and Unicorn fight, of course," Mally said, sounding as if she thought Alice a little Dim. "Since," she added meaningfully.

"Hop, skip, and jump," Thackery stated, hopping demonstratively.

"He means to say we're not far," the Dormouse explained. "It will be great fun."

Alice began packing her sack, trying to calm her racing pulse: these two seemed blithely unconcerned, so perhaps it would be great fun. She could only hope. "Who all is going to be there?"

Mally rolled her eyes, before scampering up Alice's sleeve to sit upon her shoulder for the ride. "Why not say what you mean? We all know Who you want to see."

Her dear husband.

"Hatta," Thackery laughed hysterically, as he pulled upon his right ear.

"Stop with those extravagant Anglo-Saxon attitudes, Haigha. You're not as young as you once were, and you'll throw your back out," Mally said somewhat strictly before addressing Alice. [2]
"Yes, Hatta will be there," the Dormouse sighed. "The pair of you, love sick puppies, does the pining never end?"

Not yet. And she was not holding her breath for that to change: breathing was much wiser in this case. "Tarrant's all right, isn't he?" Alice asked as they began their journey to the fight, the first fight since. He had been so well, so balanced, but she could not help but worry about him in her absence.

"He's kept himself buried in making hats, which is for the best, but he mumbles incessantly about 'Alice, little Alice',' Mally sighed. "He's well enough."

Alice could feel herself coloring at her husband's words, misunderstood though they were by the Dormouse. But she could not blame him: she could think on very little else but seeing her husband again and the baby to come. She knew how he felt.

The white banners snapped in the wind as they approached the fight. A crowd was gathered, shielding Alice's view of the two challengers, but she was more intent on spotting her husband. Just when she had begun to worry that her travelling companions had misled her about his presence here, a man strode from the crowd, walking purposefully towards them, unmistakably her Hatter in his famous top hat.

Alice set Mally on the ground before dashing the last few steps to throw herself into his arms. He lifted her off the ground, spinning her once. As the toe of her boots found the grass once more, he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"A box without hinges, key, or lid, yet golden treasure inside is hid," he riddled, stroking her cheek with a bandaged thumb. "How did you find him?"

It took Alice a moment to puzzle through her husband's riddle, so that she might respond. "Unbroken, thankfully. The very thought turned my stomach," she confessed, relying on the fact that only her husband would understand her inference. "Thank you for breakfast. It helped a great deal," she added.

He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "There's more to be had, Alice: white and brown bread. And the Queen has ham sandwiches and hay."

"For the horses," Alice ventured.

"No, for refreshment. The White King did so love his hay when he felt faint," he said a little wistfully, linking his arm in Alice's and drawing her towards the crowd. "Wait," he said, stopping so suddenly that Alice nearly tripped over her own feet, "my apologies love, but you're not properly attired for the fight."

She grimaced, looking down at her dusty whites.

Tarrant pulled an orange blossom from his buttonhole and tucked it behind her ear, his hand lingering behind the shell of her ear. "There. Perfect. The King himself would have been impressed."

"Why is it you have never spoken about Mirana's king?" Alice asked, but regretted the question immediately when she saw the dark cloud that passed over Tarrant's face.

"Some things are better left unsaid," Mirana answered, appearing suddenly at their side, her wide skirts still swaying from her graceful movement.

Tarrant slipped his arm from Alice's and bowed deeply, sweeping his hat down as he bent at the
"It is so lovely to see your Anglo-Saxon attitudes again, Hatta," the Queen said with a genuine smile. "It does my heart good."

Indeed, Alice hoped this boisterous scene of happy subjects was lifting Mirana's spirits, making her feel more herself and less her sister.

"You see, dear Hatta, our Alice is well. He was growing quite concerned, Alice, but your journey to the eighth rank goes quite smoothly, does it not? Already at the sixth rank with barely any trouble, I wager," the Queen said brightly, her fingers mindlessly waving above her shoulders.

**Barely any trouble and a good deal of verse.** Alice smiled up at her husband, who looked down at her expectantly for confirmation of the Queen's statement. "I am quite well." When the Queen's attention drifted to the field, Alice stood on her toes to whisper in Tarrant's ear, "Especially now that I am with you." She finished by kissing him on the cheek.

Not everyone was convinced that the journey had been entirely uneventful, however. Thackery hopped from one foot to another, singing loudly out of tune:

"A carrion crow sat on an oak,
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle, hi ding do,
Watching a tailor shape his cloak."[5]

Tarrant turned and stared at the Hare. "The Red Crow?" he demanded, the skin around his eyes immediately beginning to darken.[6] "The Crow has been seen in these parts?"

"The Tweedles ran across it," Mirana admitted, looking more sheepish than she had in months.

"And no one thought to mention it to me?" her husband growled.

"It seemed insignificant," the Queen explained.

"Ma Alice's saufie isna insigneeficant."

Alice pressed her hand to Tarrant's cheek, trying to recall him from the madness. "I was fine. Truly."

But he would not be soothed, and spinning on the Queen, he leaned forward menacingly, "Ye hiv endangered ma guidwife. Mair than ance."

Mirana looked shocked at this accusation for a half second before regaining her composure with a slow smile. "I love Alice, my dear Hatta. You know I want nothing to happen to her."

Alice glanced around, taking in the nervous looks people were directing at the Hatter.

"But ye thocht naething o' castin' her at the Jabberwocky—a lass, an innocent," he pressed. "Ye're na gaein tae dae it again. Ah willna lat ye."

"We did what we had to do. It was her Fate," Mirana reminded him gently, perhaps a little coolly.

"And I'm not a girl anymore," Alice began, attempting to reason with him, but he jerked his shoulder, attempting to throw her off.

He growled, "Ye gied her verra little chyce, but that wis whit ye wantit—wisnin it? She coud've deed like aw the rest o' thaim. For ye. This time ah willna allou it!"
Alice could sense where this was going and whose deaths plagued his Memory. Moreover, her own pulse was beginning to rush with a surge of adrenaline. As their connection—magical and emotional—grew stronger over time, she began to feel his pain and joy increasingly as if it was her own. He had told her that it was the same for him. He could not carry on carelessly down this path of emotionalism, however: it would not be good for her or the child.

She tried to thread her fingers through his, but they were balled too tight. "Tarrant, enough. I am fine, and this is for all of us. I'm doing this for all of us," she hurriedly reminded him. "No one was in danger, and I would have come home if I had been—straight away." She could be strong and brave and smart. The smart thing to do now in the case of danger was to come home and Think and Plan how to solve their problem, not wave Vorpal swords but use the weapon between their ears.

Mirana's eyes nervously skittered from her Champion to her Hatter.

"There, there, my dear," Alice murmured, as she urged Tarrant to straighten back up and away from the Queen. "I'm being so careful," she assured him. "I even wore that dreadful helmet you fashioned for me. You would have laughed at how ridiculous I looked in it. Quite the sight."

"Ye sud hiv takken th' pike," he said, turning his gaze on her, but to her relief she could see that the stains about his eyes were disappearing.

"It's not a bad creature," Mirana offered quietly. "It only frightens the boys. It won't harm Alice, Hatta."

Alice smoothed her hand across his temple and pressed another kiss to his cheek. "I love you," she whispered to him.

"Promise," he asked of Alice, his voice cracking.

She knew what he meant. "I promise." There was nothing that could make her endanger herself or their baby. Nothing.

He seemed mollified by that, but the arm he slipped around her waist held her tighter than before.

"I'm sure you're keen to see the Lion and Unicorn fight, my dear," Mirana observed, gamely trying to change the gloomy atmosphere that had developed around their little group.

"I suppose I would be if I had any idea what it was I was going to see," Alice admitted.

Mirana pressed her fingertips together, tilting her head to the side. "I must own that I very rarely stayed in one place long enough to watch them. I was always running here and there, as one does when one is young. But my husband was very fond of them. They fought for his crown, although no one ever won it. It would be most inconvenient if they actually did, I suppose. I wonder what he would have done then?"

"No doubt send a messenger to fetch it back," Tarrant grumbled. Alice looked up at him and saw him draw a cleansing breath. He smiled thinly at the participants who preened and pranced before them on the field and spoke again, squeezing her hip, "They should begin presently. They'll be at it all day."

A nearby courtier added, "Unless the participants are not up to it. They're not the Lion and Unicorn of old. These two are not quite suited to the task."

Indeed, as Alice examined the combatants, they struck her as rather Odd. "The Lion is rather small, is he not?" He did not have the luxurious mane one would expect of a lion in his prime.
"He is not much beyond a cub," Mirana said behind her hand. "But he is very brave and insisted that he was ready. He is exceptionally eager to prove himself to be a good bishop."[7]

Alice was on the verge of asking if what kind of a religious he practiced, when something tapped the toe of her boot, and she looked down to see Mally poking her with her hatpin sword. She reached down and scooped the Dormouse up, placing him on her husband's hat rim, where she knew Mally preferred to sit. They had come to an agreement some time ago that left them both satisfied: Mally rode via hat and Alice walked at his side.

"The Unicorn is a lady," Mally whispered, as she ducked under one of Tarrant's hatpins and arranged herself upon the rim.

"And what's wrong with that?" Alice replied.

"Nothing," Mally agreed with a satisfied nod.

"She makes a most lovely knight," the Queen sighed.[8] "I can't recall a more beautiful sight than my lovely Unicorn outfitted in her new armor."

"A female Champion, a female Unicorn. Why not?" Mally continued.

"Why not?" Tarrant said with a conspiratorially with a wink.

As the afternoon waned and the Lion and Unicorn grew tired, the drums sounded to announce refreshments and Alice was able to find some time to steal away with Tarrant. It was not much privacy, just a step away into the woods behind some agreeable trees, but it was more than he had hoped for when he had drifted off to sleep the previous night alone in the palace.

Kneeling amongst the pine needles, Alice rested her head against his lapel. "Seeing you today was just what I needed," she confessed.

"It is always what I need," he countered. While he did not descend into madness when his wife left his side, he only felt Fully Tarrant when he was with her.

Alice reached up a hand, pressing her fingertips to his lips and he promptly kissed them. She dragged her fingers down, causing his breath to hitch as they tugged on his lower lip, dipped over his chin, and down the length of his neck to his bowtie. Her fingers, his lips, her body soft against his… Don't think on it, lad! They were outside with their friends just a hairsbreadth away, and their days of outside indiscretions were behind them. Surely, surely they were…

"I miss our little bed," Alice whispered. "I miss being with you in our little bed."

"Naughty," he lisped. "Keep those thoughts inside your head."

"Ooh, now you're rhyming," she purred.

He cleared his throat, "Please don't tempt me, love." They lacked a proper bed or bedchamber—royal tents with narrow canvas cots would suffice tonight for those who were loathe to make their way home in the dark—but there was this bed of pine needles and this exceptionally useful tree. He was an enterprising hatter, he could be creative, he could improvise. All he needed was his wife, after all.

Working her fingers underneath his collar, she hummed, "Don't you miss me?"
"Of course, laddie, but I can't speak on it," he insisted, as his fingers flexed, attempting not to touch. If he spoke on it, Alice would be without key elements of clothing in short order. Besides, sleeping Bluebells sprouted to their right, just waiting to awaken, observe, and comment.

"You don't have to speak, silly husband," she wheedled, shifting against his lap.

"Alice!" he said with a jerk. "Behave yourself, you little temptress."

"Fine," she groaned in frustration, pushing at his chest. "I see what you're up to though: you mean to leave me with nothing to speak about but my feelings on this whole muddle."

Tarrant bit his lip: he knew Alice did not like to share her feelings. He sometimes had to tickle them out of her, which could be painful. "You might whisper your feelings to me—instead of the naughtiness at which you are frighteningly proficient—if it will help."

"I'll manage." She sighed, "But, it feels overwhelming, hearing of more and more tragedy."

He wished he could carry this burden for her. Just as he had wished he could step forward on her behalf to slay the Jabberwocky. But, as strange as it was to think it, more was at stake now, and he was left powerless. It was enough to boil the blood of a Hightopp man. "Ah knaw," he said, stroking her hair. "A'd pertect ye again if Ah coud."

"I need to know, know it all, so we can protect the baby," she said, looking up through her lashes at him. "So I can be the best queen I can be, for all of our sakes."

He could nearly read her thoughts: Will I go mad as well?

Rationally he knew why Mirana had chosen her, why Mirana would risk Alice in this venture: Alice was mad, but the Right kind of mad, the best kind of mad. He could not picture her calling for people's heads, even if the magic of Underland seeped into her very soul. She would be the Queen Underland Needed. Nevertheless, he could understand his wife's fears, and it fell to him to calm them, just as she so often had pulled him back from the brink.

No one was around to see, so he rested his hand on her middle. "You don't need to worry about any of us, because you are the best queen I know, Alice. Already."

"Tarrant," she chided softly, "I'm not a real queen."

"Must I keep reminding you that this is not a dream? I thought we had settled that this is very much Real. What must I do to assure you of that fact?"

Alice chuffed at his semantics as she tucked her hand within his waistcoat, where he imagined she could feel his warmth and the rhythm of his heart, where she could feel his realness. A Dream Tarrant would no doubt not feel so warm to the touch nor so swift of pulse, something he might have suggested to Alice as a useful test once upon a time on the balcony of Marmoreal if his heart had not been in his throat at the time.

"You only have to be yourself," he continued. "That is more than enough. Just Plain Alice."

Alice nodded against him. "That's all I can be, I'm afraid."

"Just call upon your considerable muchness, my love. You're a warrior. Believe in yourself."

"And us."

"Aye. I'll be by your side. The Royal Hatter."
"More than that to me," she mused, stroking him beneath his waistcoat. "Tell me what I need to know: tell me about Lily and the King."

He breathed deeply, composing himself and preparing to measure his words. He had been fond of Mirana's daughter, for she had been a great wearer of hats and had an easy smile for everyone. Her laughter had sounded like trilling bells and she had been an uncommonly talented dancer. His heart thumped irregularly as the princess' wide dark eyes and white locks formed before his mind's eye.

"Lily died first," he finally managed to say. Mirana had lost her daughter, and for a time he had thought the Queen would lose her mind as well.

"Does Mirana not know that?" she asked quietly, her face knit in confusion.

"Aye, she knows. She knows it all." In painful, blood spattered detail.

"But, she asked me to seek out information about her daughter, as if she didn't."

He felt his chest tighten. "She's pretending," he lisped. He should know: he had spent years pretending, when he had been sunk deep in his madness. Once the water had gotten to a certain depth, it had sometimes felt as if a boulder attached to his ankle was pulling him steadily down. It would seem that his White Queen was likewise sinking.

"Will you tell me what became of Lily?"

"She had her head." Lured her to the palace under false pretenses. For want of evidence, dressed her in red. Accused her of scheming for things that should not be hers. Locked her in the dungeon. Listened to her screams. Looked on while the headsman…

"Why?" she asked, although she had to know that Iracebeth's Reasons were inexcusably Unreasonable.

"Lily had grown too fair and of an age to draw attention." There had been scores of men who would have married the beautiful, young princess if she had been interested, but she had not been. Lily's emotional maturity had not developed apace with her physical maturity. Lily had still been more interested in dolls than men when she had died. Naught but a girl.

"Whose attention did she draw?"

"The Red King."

She frowned. "Which do you mean? Wasn't there more than one Red King."

"There was, but not by then. The old Red King had already died," he clarified.

"The Tweedles told me something about it."

He had no doubt that was not as enlightening as Alice would have liked it to be, but he could manage better than the boys even if he felt the pain of Recollection acutely. "Iracebeth was born to sit the White throne, but she was always unbalanced, and therefore was passed over in favor of Mirana. She ended up marrying the King of Hearts and everything looked as if it might turn out well enough." She had loved him. He knew Iracebeth had, and if she had not always been levelheaded, her head was not initially as large as it became, and her threats to take others' heads were just that—empty threats. Swallowing hard, he fought back the threat of madness that swirled about his ankles at the memories these musings awakened. "But she saw her chance when the Red King died."
"To rise to the level of her sister with the Red daughters dead too."

Yes, the girls had died as well; she had seen to that, used the whispers of the Knave to encourage the nobles of Underland that it must be so, all in order that she might sit the Red throne—a seat of nearly as much importance as her sister's. As a result, an ancient royal family of Underland had been completely wiped out by Iracebeth's growing insanity. It would eventually bring about the death of other families as well. Even his. Mither, Faither, Sister…

Alice's hand lacing in his brought him back to the present, and he looked down at their joined hands as she continued, "But what became of the Red Queen? The one who sat the throne before Iracebeth?"

Alice remembered some of what had passed when she was a child, but much of it was a blur. Many of the people she had met were lost in the recesses of her mind, and she seemingly remembered none of these Principal Players—not even the sometimes mean spirited Red Queen. The Red Queen was a Fury, but of another type than Iracebeth. Whereas Iracebeth was Rage and uncontained Passion, the Red Queen's passion was cold and calm, formal and strict, and pedantic to the tenth degree like an amalgamation of all governesses from Above. [9] Alice had once given her a good shake, believing her to be the cause of all Mischief. She no doubt had been.

Despite the seriousness of their discussion, the memory of the original Red Queen caused Mirth to bubble up from his belly. It was a relief. Tarrant twittered, unable to hold back the giggles, "Most unfortunate."

"You don't sound as if you thought it was."

"The Red Queen's death was most unintended, Alice, and Years Before. She was crushed under the weight of her own words."

Alice looked suspicious. "Words?"

"A very large dictionary teetered on the shelf in the Fortress of the Red Queen and then tottered and then…" he explained, slapping his hands together with a loud clap for emphasis, "she was crushed almost flat."

"Oh," Alice said, sounding startled. "That's…"

"Quite a mess."

"Ye-es," she acceded, "although I had thought to say something more appropriate."

"Well, by all means, do, love."

"Never mind," she said with a sigh. "All right then, it all becomes clear, I think. Iracebeth sat the Red throne with her husband, and Lily drew the attention of this second Red King, who was Lily's uncle?" she asked, sounding as if the Idea was Ridiculous.

It had been. Lily was terribly fond of her kindly uncle and the feeling was returned, but there was nothing Romantic about their relationship. "So the Red One believed, and she killed them both for it—her husband and her niece. Her paranoia knew no bounds." His hands began to tremble as he spoke, and he pulled Alice closer to his chest, breathing in the Aliceness of her. It reminded him that these things were in the Past and Alice was his Present. Alice and the bairn, who would be his Future as well.

"And what did Mirana do?"
"Her husband stood as Champion for their daughter's murder."

He knew Alice could guess the rest and would spare him from speaking it. Mirana had lost her daughter and husband in nearly one blow. It was no wonder that Madness lurked in the recesses of the Queen's mind.

"It's dreadful, perfectly dreadful," she murmured.

"I know." He had lost everything once before, but if he lost his Alice, their daughter… Stop!

"Mirana isn't well, Tarrant."

He nodded, "I read *The Lost Book of Underland* you left behind. There must be more thrones occupied."

Her fingers curled against his chest. "Is this the sort of thing you want for our baby? It's unspeakably horrible."

"It was horrible," he acknowledged quietly. "But it will be different this time."

"How do you know?" she asked, sounding as if she wanted very much to believe him.

"She will be better, once you are crowned," he promised her, hoping that he was right. "It will sort itself out." How could it not? Alice would be the most Perfect Queen in the history of Underland. He should know, as she had been His Queen for some time now and he had never known greater happiness. "Underland can be a wonderful place: it needn't be death and menacing madness."

"I know," she murmured. "It can be a Wonderland."

"And our little Alice doesn't need to sit a throne if she doesn't want to. The wee bairn can—and will if she is anything like you, laddie—do anything she pleases."

"We need to begin thinking on names, for I refuse to call her Alice."

He knew the bairn wanted a name of her own as well, despite his being so very attached to the name Alice—*only the best name!* His girls would have their own way.

Admittedly, he generally did not mind letting his Alice have her way. Indeed, the sky was darkening and soon it would be time to rest their heads, and he would let her have her way with him if she liked. "Stay the night."

Alice kissed him in the hollow of his throat, "I was planning on it."

"Good, because…"

And then Alice finished his Thought, "I can't sleep properly without you."

The narrow cot would have to fit two tonight. Close quarters would never feel so welcome.

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[1] This quotation is part of a larger one from C. S. Lewis: "It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

[2] When the March Hare and Mad Hatter appear in *Through the Looking-Glass*, they are called
Haigha and Hatta, and the White King explains that they are Anglo-Saxon messengers, and their gestures are Anglo-Saxon attitudes.

[3] Answer: egg. This riddle can be found in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. An expert in all things Anglo-Saxon, his riddles show the influence of *The Book of Exeter's* riddles.


[5] This is part of the first verse of the nursery rhyme and song "The Carrion Crow." The first version of the song is from *The Baby's Bouquet, A Fresh Bunch of Rhymes and Tunes* by Walter Crane (1878). The crow is associated with war and death in Celtic mythology.


[7] The Lion is a red bishop. In chess, a 'good bishop' is a bishop that has been positioned on the board so as to move freely among the pawns.

[8] The Unicorn is a white knight.

[9] This clarification of the differences between the Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts is a restatement of Carroll's own feelings on the subject as expressed in the stage notes for "Alice on the Stage".

[10] When Alice meets the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, she is initially friendly, but she is the adversary in the book. One of the ways she makes herself troublesome is by wordplay.
Despite the rules of the game, Tarrant and Mally had both argued with gusto that morning before she had set off on her journey to the seventh rank that Someone should be allowed to accompany Alice. It seemed to Alice that Mally did so due to the fact that her friend Tarrant felt so strongly about it. Indeed, the Dormouse had dealt a blow to her own Considerable Pride by pointing out that her size might make her Less Significant in the rules of the game, so that an exception might be made, allowing more than one on a square at a time. Alice had to agree with Mirana's pronouncement, however: *Mallymkun, you are Most Significant.*

'I am so very close to being finished,' she had assured Tarrant, kissing him on the tip of the nose, his cheek, and forehead, and pressing her hand to his heart as a silent promise.

She had come this far and she would complete her crossing alone as she had begun it. By traversing yet another brook, she began the last leg of her journey refreshed and full of muchness itself.

She could be queen.

As she walked further, however, the atmosphere around her seemed to change and her confidence wavered. Walking beneath the trees that very nearly hid the sunlight from her, the colors of Underland appeared more muted than usual. The air itself felt still. There were no birds calling to each other, no cheerful Daisies lining the path. She could hear herself breath and she fancied that anyone within a mile could do the same.

She heard the thunder of hooves, therefore, long before she could see who it was that approached. She was unsure whether she wanted to meet with someone alone in this wood, and the thunder of her heart soon echoed nigh as loud.

"I am a warrior," she murmured to herself, though she had no weapons.

The horse and its rider came into view, the white of the knight's armor glinting as he passed through a sunbeam that managed to reach the ground through the dense cover. Alice stood her ground as he approached her, growing ever larger by means of increasing proximity and not Upelkuchen.

As he reined in before her, she could see rusted spots on that same armor that seemed to indicate that he was either a much abused knight or rather careless about his appearance. His considerable waxed mustache was entirely white, as well, which did not necessarily indicate age in Underland, but she thought she could make out crinkles about his eyes through the slit of his helmet. As she was examining his person, he tumbled from his horse to the ground. Convinced by now that he was an older gentleman, Alice panic turned to concern, as he might have hurt himself in this fall. Indeed, he had fallen on his head, and she could only hope his helmet had protected him somewhat from the blow.
"Oh my! Are you quite all right?" she asked, taking a step towards him with the intent of helping him to his feet, but the man was seemingly quite spry and jumped to his feet without aid, climbing back atop his horse before she could even extend a hand.

"Perfectly," he said rather cheerfully. "But are you all right? Well, you do seem to be in one Piece," he said, answering his own question. "If you should come into some kind of Trouble, I will fight for you."

That was generous if a little presumptuous. "I hope that won't be necessary. I intend for this to be the uneventful conclusion of a Safe Journey." Tarrant would be most uneasy if he thought there was a need for an armored guard.

"What sort of journey?"

She did not yet feel that she should reveal her purpose, so she said vaguely enough, "I am crossing the squares of Underland."

"Excellent. I shall see you safely to the next square if you like."

He did have the appearance of kindness about him, and Alice would not mind the company, as the uneasy feeling of this square might be less oppressive if there was someone with whom she could speak. Nevertheless, she knew next to nothing about this strange knight. "I am afraid I don't know who you are, Sir."

"But I know who you are," he responded from inside his helmet.

"I don't see how you could."

He adjusted his seat in the saddle, sliding the toes of his armor back in the stirrups before addressing her, "Let me guess: Morrígan?"

"No, just Alice."

He shook his head, his plate armor rattling. "If you are not quite Morrígan yet, you soon will be. Once you cross the next brook, no doubt."

Alice chewed her lower lip, considering how she might better introduce herself to clear up the obvious misunderstanding. She finally settled upon 'Champion,' as she had already had some luck on this journey introducing herself as such. "I'm the Alice, Champion of the White Queen."

"Ah, well then. Just as I thought. You're a third of the way to being Morrígan. You've protected your queen and you have only yet to become one yourself—step one and two. Step three will be at Harvest."

He seemed terribly well informed for a complete stranger. She only just prevented herself from looking down at her middle, thinking of the garden they were to put in and their Harvest baby—do I look different?

Tilting his dented helmet to see more properly out of the eye slit, he coughed and spoke once more, "How goes the journey across the squares?"

"Who are you?" It might have been Rude to press the issue, but he had been equally Rude in ignoring it. She was not going to give him any Personal Information until she was satisfied on this point.
"Ah, that's the greatest question of all. Is it not? I can tell you who I once was. I was once one of the White Queen's knights, but now I'm not so sure who I am. It's a puzzle."

"And how did you know I was on my way to becoming Queen?"

"I might be old, but my eyesight isn't that bad, young lady. You're certainly not on your way to becoming King. Besides," he said, stroking the curl of his white mustache, "I can almost make out the crown right above your head. Yes, you will be a great queen indeed."[2]

She looked up. "I don't see anything."

"Well, I'm more accustomed to seeing Royalty than you are, I wager. I have an eye for it, for I've decades of service under my hauberk. I can see it coming a mile away."

"I serve the White Queen, you know," Alice admitted, as she began to walk once more, content that this odd man meant her no harm.

Turning his horse, he followed slowly at her side, the clop of the horse's hooves setting a pleasant rhythm for their forward progress. "Yes, of course you do. Although, you've been nothing but her Pawn. It will be a great deal safer for all of us once you are your Own Woman."

He seemed to be awfully knowledgeable about state secrets for someone she had never even seen at court. "Where have you been all this time? I've never met with you."

He paused, the reins going slack as he began to tug at his helmet.

"Let me help you," she suggested, coming alongside his horse and gesturing for him to lean down. Alice gave a mighty tug, but other than pulling him nearly sideways off the horse, the helmet stayed put. "Wait," she said, releasing him and reaching for her rucksack. Her husband had made one addition to her pack before their parting: butter. This, like all the other contents, was about to come in handy. "I hope you don't mind," Alice said apologetically as she smoothed a little butter around the edges of his helmet. With another mighty tug the helmet finally came loose in Alice's hands and she smiled at him now that she could see his unquestionably kind eyes, looking gratefully down at her. "Here, sir," she said, handing him the helmet, which he tucked beneath his arm.

He smoothed back his shaggy white mane of hair and wiped at his buttered cheeks with a handkerchief pulled from some hidden source, collecting himself. "It isn't exactly accurate that we've never met," he corrected her gently once his person was once more in order and the handkerchief tucked back away.

"I'm sorry. When was that?"

He picked the reins up so that they could begin moving forward once more. "When you were a little girl. A very inquisitive little girl," he added. "You were terribly interested in all of my inventions, and not everyone was always so kind as to take an interest, you know."

She could not remember him in the least unfortunately. "You're an inventor as well as a knight?"

He shook his head sadly, "I haven't had much time for inventing for many years nor should I rightly be called a knight anymore. I've been in the Outlands, hiding like a coward."

"You don't seem a coward to me." He had, after all, very kindly offered to see her safely across this square, to fight for her if need be.

"I left the kingdom when things grew dark and the Rules of Battle were not observed. I took the
Rules of Battle very seriously, Alice, and so I fled."

The poor knight seemed in low spirits, and while Alice could not help but think it was a bit cowardly to have fled, she could understand the desire to flee Duty. "We all do our best," she said softly.

"It was the children, you know. I have a great fondness for children, and when the Red Queen had her children murdered, that simply was not part of the Rules of Battle."

Alice slowed, feeling suddenly sick to her stomach. "Iracebeth had children?" she asked quietly, hoping she had misunderstood.

"Ten of them. Dear creatures, always done up in hearts toddling along."[3]

She pressed her hand to her stomach to try to keep the morning's meal down as she breathed slowly through her nose.

"Are you all right, my dear?" the Knight asked, as she walked a few steps away from him. She could hear him tumble to the ground, but he must have recovered just as he had done earlier, as he quickly continued with his questioning: "Have I upset you?"

She could not be troubled to respond, because at that moment she doubled over and lost the contents of her stomach.

"Oh, my," he tut-tutted, coming to stand alongside her and pat her back comfortingly. "You're sick."

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I didn't know about the children." Is this what becomes of the children of the Kings and Queens of Underland? Death for all? Lily and the Red children too?

"After the Red King's supposed betrayal, she wanted no reminder of him," the Knight said quietly. "Most unconscionable."

"Something should have been done," Alice hissed through her teeth. "Someone should have done something. Why did no one stop her?" she demanded angrily.

"I'm sure it was my fault entirely," the Knight confessed, rubbing his brow morosely. "I crept away when I heard, quite useless to my White Queen."

Alice drew a shuddering breath. In her shock and disgust, she realized she was being unfair. What had happened was no more the Knight's fault than it had been Tarrant's. It would do no good to make this man feel the burden of it more than he already did.

"I shan't speak on it anymore, my dear," the Knight continued apologetically. "I can see that death disturbs you."

It seemed to lurk in every corner.

He scuffed his feet on the forest floor. "I am so useless. I have only upset you needlessly by unburdening myself."

Her mouth tasted dreadful and her lips were cracked. She licked them before clearing her throat. "You have been useful to me already, sir."

"Have I?"
She glanced up at him as she dug in her pack for her canteen, needing water to clear her palate. "Certainly," she said with as much sincerity as she could muster, for he had been kind to her. She only felt wretched from the news and could not fault the messenger.

"Yes, well then, I suppose that counts for something."

"It does," she assured him between large gulps of water.

What she wanted now more than ever was to be done with this process, to be back home with her husband and in his arms. Her confidence was entirely shaken, and she was no longer sure she would accept the crown. The potential consequences for her family were simply intolerable. Underland be damned. It seemed an almost unsolvable situation, but Tarrant would know what to do; he would use his creative reasoning and find a way. If she could just get to the eighth square, he would be waiting for her and they could come to a workable conclusion together.

"Thank you. That's very kind of you to say so," he said with a teary eyed smile.

Straightening herself up, she attempted to hurry him along. "And if you mount again, we might hurry on to the final brook. That would be most helpful."

He nodded, awkwardly moving towards his abandoned steed. "If you are up to it," he said, pulling himself atop of the horse once more.

"It was only a bit of queasiness." And uncertainty of her path.

"Very well. I shall attempt to continue being helpful."

Alice nodded wordlessly and they continued on in silence for some time until the Knight spoke up, musing aloud, "If I might be of use again to queens and important persons, perhaps I will even begin my inventions again."

There was no reason Alice would not want this Knight to find some happiness, so she saw fit to wish him well. "I hope you do," she said, as they approached what seemed to be the end of the forest. Yes, they were now reaching open fields. Perhaps the journey was nearly over. And without any real trouble. Just more distressing news weighing down her spirits and shaking her resolve.

"There is one invention I still have. One that wasn't left behind out of necessity when I fled," he said with renewed brightness.

"And what is that?" Alice asked, turning her face into the sunshine as they broke free of the trees.

"A song. The tune is of my own invention. It used to bring tears to the eyes of my listeners."

Oh, no. "Is it a sad song?" She had already had quite enough of depressing types of artistic expression, thank you very much.

"Not in the least. It merely moves people. The words, the tune, my voice."

She could tell he was waiting for an invitation to share it, and he seemed in need of encouragement, so that he would not lose his courage again. She could use some of that herself, so she might as well perform the kindness for someone else. "I should like to hear it if you don't mind sharing it with me."

He immediately dropped the reins of the horse, letting them slip around the animal's neck, eager to begin his song. As he began, Alice could tell that this was not a tune of his own invention: it was
"I give thee all, I can no more," but it would do no good to interrupt and remind him of such a thing. Besides, she was struck by something much more significant than the familiarity of the song. Suddenly Everything was familiar.

She could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday—the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight—the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armor in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her—the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet—and the black shadows of the forest behind—all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she watched the strange pair, listening, in a half dream, to the melancholy music of the song.

"I'll tell thee everything I can; There's little to relate. I saw an aged aged man, A-sitting on a gate. 'Who are you, aged man?' I said. 'and how is it you live?' And his answer trickled through my head Like water through a sieve.

He said 'I look for butterflies That sleep among the wheat: I make them into mutton-pies, And sell them in the street. I sell them unto men,' he said, 'Who sail on stormy seas; And that's the way I get my bread - A trifle, if you please.'"

He would have gone on with this tune not of his own invention, beating time with his hands with a foolish smile on his face, but as happy as singing his song seemingly made him, even he stopped when the sky turned uncommonly dark for midday.

An ominous koww, followed by an echoing eh-aw, alerted Alice to the return of the monstrous Crow. It swept overhead, tilting over the fields before them.

The old Knight fell off his horse once again, this time backwards, perhaps in fright. He was beginning to scramble to get atop it again, but Alice did not think it wise for him to mount again. "We must take cover!" she shouted, as Thoughts tumbled through her mind at a frightening pace. She had Promised, solemnly Promised Tarrant, and now here she was with a giant Crow whirling back over the fields and flying at them at an unimaginable speed. How would she go home to Think and Plan? The creature was upon them Now, action must be taken Now. But she had vowed, promised, pledged…

The Knight released the horse's reins and grabbed Alice's hand instead, pulling her awkwardly with a clank of armor toward the only cover in sight: a haystack. Perhaps the crow had not yet spotted them, Alice prayed as they dashed across the open space between themselves and cover. They stumbled to stop, falling to their knees before being able to recover in a crouch behind the moldy haystack, made old by winter's ravages.

If I keep very quiet. If I keep oh so still. Alice pressed her hand over her racing heart, willing it to be quiet too.

"I shall fight for you, my dear," the Knight said in hushed tones. "Even if the Rules of Battle are not properly observed."
Even his vow of service was much too loud. Alice pressed her finger to her lips in desperation, shaking her head, 'no.'

The crow made another pass over the barren field, making its loud, throaty *caw-aw-ah* call that raised the hairs on Alice's arms.

*If I keep very quiet.*

…

The royal entourage moved rather slowly, a creeping caterpillar of subjects and servants inching across the fields of Underland towards the eighth square, where an enormous dinner-party was being hosted by Alice that afternoon. Of course, Tarrant cringed when he thought that Alice was unaware she was to play hostess so soon. They had expected coronation festivities, but not upon the very moment of the completion of her journey. She would be tired. She would want to return home. And she would no doubt be annoyed at not having been able to invite who she chose, but Mirana informed him that Alice had been given the opportunity and had failed to take it. Mirana stated that Alice's lessons in proper ladylike manners had evidently failed her. Somehow Tarrant doubted that. Alice was an expert in Rudeness; that is, the diagnosing of it.

He had been walking for some time alongside Mirana's white steed with Mally sitting atop his hat, when the hair's on his arms began to stand at attention. Glancing to his left and right, at the barren fields through which they tromped, he felt certain that something lurked about them. And yet, he could observe nothing of note.

"Mally," he lisped to the Dormouse, whose feet dangled over the edge of his hat.

"Yes, Hatta?"

"Do you not feel something?" he asked quietly.

"A great many things. You'll 'ave to be more specific," she chided him.

He patted his pockets as his heart began to pound most unnervingly in his chest. "Thimbles, the laddie needs thimbles," he muttered, slipping his hands into his pockets. *But there are not enough to be had! Only three, three measly thimbles and all here with me.* He shuffled the thimbles between his fingers, staring down at them in horror.

*I'm in the wrong place. My place is by Alice.*

Mally swung down, descending on his shoulder. "What's that, Hatta?"

He swiveled to his left, thimbles falling from his hand in his urgency to address the Queen on her mount, "Do you happen to have a square of soap?"

"Careful, dear Hatta: you have nearly unseated Mally," the Queen frowned, her white hair swinging loose behind her back.

His breath began to come quickly, as if he was running, when he most certainly was not. He panted, "Dae ye hiv saip or a fork?"

Mirana looked over her shoulder at the trunks being lugged dutifully across the squares of Underland by her household. "Somewhere, yes, but everything would have to be unpacked to find them."
Then unpack it all! Grasping at his chest, he stumbled, vaguely hearing a squeak and a scream as he fell to his knees. A hand clasped his shoulder, but he shoved the unknown owner of the hand off. He did not need a hand, he needed to be at his laddie's side.

"Heavens! Hatta!" Mirana cried, and he blinked, trying to look up at his monarch and clear the blackness from his vision, as it closed in around him. "Pull him up, help him to his feet. We're going to be late for Alice's party."

The party? "Ye'r thinkin' on the pairty," he growled, as he collapsed to his hands, fisting handfuls of grass. Were the Queen's priorities that skewed? "We hiv tae help."

"Help who?" a small voice urged, somewhere close to his ear.

Alice. Alice! But he could not be sure anyone heard him. He could not be sure his Voice was being heard at all.

…

"Please, don't," she said, seizing his arm so as to restrain the armored man from rushing in with rusted sword raised. Twice as the Crow had circled by them she had been tempted to scream, cower, or even welcome the Knight's offer to do Battle on her behalf, but something prevented her from it. If she was to take the crown up, she would not have her reign be born in blood.

"It circles too close to you, and you would be Queen," the kindly Knight worried, still fingering the sword at his side. "I left the White Queen, but I will not abandon the New."

"You're very good," Alice assured him, patting his arm quickly, "but I mean to say I don't want the creature harmed."

"Ah, it all makes sense now. I take it you're a Pacifist?"

Alice grimmaced, glancing over the top of the haystack, "I slew the Jabberwocky, sir." She wished she had the luxury of being a pacifist, but that was not her path.

The man's eyes grew large. "Truly?"

"Truly, but I don't think such measures are necessary here." That was her hope at least. "I suspect, I begin to think that the poor thing is merely starving." Indeed, the creature wheeled over the barren fields repeatedly, crying and calling out in what was beginning to sound like hunger—not rage—to Alice, hearing the difference as a mother differentiates the sound of her child's cries.

"Might be," the Knight agreed with evident uncertainty.

If only she could help the creature. Her heart began to beat not only in fear, but also with tender sympathy for it. It did sound so very hungry, but perhaps not so hungry for Champions and Knights…

Oh! But she did have something—corn. Quickly unlacing her pack, she moved several things about until she found the bag of corn. 'I shan't have an oven in which to bake,' she had reminded her husband, when she had seen the corn amongst the items intended for the rucksack, but he had packed it nonetheless. His Forethought, she was coming to realize, was positively Magical.

"If only I could make it understand. If I could make it come near," she said, testing the weight of the grain in her hand. She wished it was a larger bag. "Have you any idea how to seek its attention?"
The Knight paused, considering. "Ah!" he said, raising his finger, "You may hunt it with forks and hope. You may threaten its life with a railway-share. You may charm it with smiles and soap."

"Oh heavens, I haven't any of those things," she replied peeping once more over the haystack, as the great bird whirled over head for the fifth time. Normally she would at least have a great many Smiles on hand, but her face would not currently cooperate, being presently more motivated by trepidation than pleasure. "Any other notions—safe notions?" she pressed.

"Why yes. You may seek it with thimbles—and seek it with care."[6]

"You sound very much like my husband," Alice hurriedly whispered, crouching back down. "But I haven't got any of his thimbles. He keeps them…"

My husband.

Tarrant.

Her husband's whispered words as he packed her bag for this journey floated back to her as if over the very air of Underland itself:

"Little Boy Blue,
Come blow your horn,
The sheep's in the meadow,
The cow's in the corn;
But where is the boy
Who looks after the sheep?
He's under a haycock,
Fast asleep.
Will you wake him?
No, not I,
For if I do,
He's sure to cry."[7]

*The Horn of Heimdall!*

She dug in her pack for the elaborately engraved golden horn he had most soberly packed for her.[9] The words that had passed between them resounded in her ears, urging her on.

'What's this?'

'The Horn of Heimdall.'

'It looks expensive. Where did you get it?'

'It's been in the family for ages.'

'And what pray is it for?'

'For Boojum emergencies.[10]

'For what kind of emergencies?'

'Emergencies of the pastoral kind, Alice.'
She had not imagined she would have any of those. But it was here and she was the laddie of prophecy, she was her husband's boy blue. Thanks to her husband, she knew just how to deal with this Crow. Bringing the horn to her lips, she blew with all her might, eliciting a deep booming sound that echoed through the valley. The result was nigh on instantaneous: the Crow circled in ever tighter circles and finally came to rest before the haystack.[1]

"Watch my back, please," Alice said over her shoulder to the Knight as she strode towards the creature, mustering her muchness with horn in one hand, corn in the other. "Are you hungry?" she asked, feigning bravery, for feigning it sometimes led to feeling it.

The creature's great black head bobbed. She felt instinctually that she could understand it and that it could understand her.

"Yes, of course you are. Look at these fields," she clucked. "Who knows when they were last planted and you have no one to look after you, do you?" Not with the Red King, its keeper, long dead and gone.

The creature bobbed its head once more, and Alice stepped close enough to ruffle its feathers should she choose to do so.

"Here," she said, holding out her hand to offer the Crow the corn. "It isn't much, but it will help."

Pressing her cracked lips together tightly as the creature bent its neck to peck at her hand, Alice could scarcely draw breath for fear. Its eyes were like giant black pools, so she did her best not to look into them.

"Is it all right?" the Knight called, his heavy footsteps making his movement from behind the haystack evident even though she could not see him.

"Yes, sir. It's hungry, as I thought. Do you happen to know when these fields were last planted?"

He shuffled closer and Alice murmured soothingly to the Crow, so that it might not fear the armored man's approach.

"Undoubtedly it has been years. I wasn't the only man in Underland too afraid to do his Duty," he confessed.

Alice could now see him out of the corner of her eye. "I won't stand for that. If this creature is hungry, no doubt people are hungry as well. There are improvements that need to be seen to and a great deal to be righted that has gone wrong." It was altogether too much for one queen to handle, threatening Madness or no. Alice suddenly felt very guilty for ever having called the petitioners from Queast Grumblers. There were weighty concerns to be dealt with and the Queen needed her assistance to get the job done.

"That is why you will be such a great Queen, my dear," the Knight, whose face was nearly as white as his hair, said with a nervous smile. "I have no doubt."

She wanted to Choose her family, but there were so many in need. This Crow might have died or driven by hunger it might have committed some grave evil. The deaths would only mount if she did not take up the crown. And yet, her mind turned to the baby girl inside of her and she feared for her, feared for her safety, feared for her future.

[1] The Morrígan is a Celtic goddess most often associated with warfare. However, war may not have been the primary aspect of the goddess. Her association with cattle suggests fertility and
sovereignty. She could also be interpreted as providing political or military aid or protection to the king—again, acting as a goddess of sovereignty.


[3] In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Alice sees the ten royal children, who appear at the croquet game hand in hand and ornamented with hearts.

[4] This (and the song that follows) is taken from Through the Looking-Glass. Alice states that of her entire journey, this is the moment she remembers clearly even years later.

[5] So, here is a bit of an American English, British English conundrum. In England, 'corn' is wheat. In Scotland, 'corn' refers to oats. So, before Columbus ever stumbled across maize, people were calling various forms of grain 'corn'. For instance, Latin texts that have been translated by enterprising Brits will refer to the 'corn dole' in the Roman Empire by which they mean the bread dole. Moreover, they basically do not grow maize in England, and since "Little Boy Blue" is an English nursery rhyme, I am assuming the rhyme refers to wheat, when it says 'corn'. This is all to say that while crows do notoriously love corn, Alice is not digging maize out of her pack, but most likely a handful of wheat. (Or oats if Hatter is being Outlandish.)


[7] "Little Boy Blue" was first recorded in Tommy Thumb's Little Song Book (c. 1744), but there is reason to believe that the rhyme is much older. Indeed, it may be alluded to in Shakespeare's King Lear (III, vi).

[8] The Gjallarhorn or 'yelling horn' of Norse mythology is a horn associated with the god Heimdallr and the wise being Mímir. The figure of Mímir is renowned for his knowledge and wisdom, and he was beheaded during the Æsir-Vanir War. Heimdallr is attested as possessing foreknowledge and is described as "the whitest of the gods".

[9] Legendary magical horns used for more than drinking and music are not so unusual. One of the most famous is Olifant, Roland's horn in The Song of Roland.

[10] The Boojum is a particularly dangerous kind of snark.

Alice trudged across what she imagined to be the last brook, soaking her breeches up to her knees in the cool water. She was that much closer to reaching the end and returning to her husband, while leaving behind the Knight and the Crow with promises of Doing Something once she was Queen. The fear of what that meant for her family still bubbled in her stomach, but Tarrant would know what to do. Everything would be fine once they were together again and could walk the path together.

As it turned out, she became a Queen much sooner than she had expected. She had no more touched the thick turf on the opposite shore than she felt an unaccustomed weight upon her head. Reaching up, she blindly ran her hand over the foreign object. It was cold and smooth to the touch. She recognized it for what it was—a crown—before she lifted it from her head. She examined it with furrowed brow: it was glossy and black, came to a series of points, and had a large sphere in the middle. More shocking perhaps, it had materialized out of nowhere.

"Noble Alice."

Alice looked up from the crown to see Mirana gliding over the lush green grass towards her, hands floating aloft.

"It's black," Alice replied, not knowing what else to say.

"It makes a lovely contrast with your fair complexion," she said encouragingly. "Don't let the darkness of it disturb you."

"The color doesn't so much matter to me. I only wonder at what it signifies. Yours is white." Was she to play the dark contrast to Mirana's gentle rule?

"Oh, what it signifies? Nothing unpleasant, I assure you. Underland simply must have the title Queen of Spades in mind for you, Alice. I did think it a good fit for my Champion. You look unhappy, my dear: would you rather sit a different throne? Perhaps your heart's desire lies elsewhere? Just not with the throne of hearts, I wager. We've both agreed that would be a beastly chair for anyone for now."

Alice ignored Mirana's string of words, fixating instead on her next concern. "Where is Tarrant?" She had imagined he would be here to greet her at the end of her journey.

The Queen's mouth twitched. "He's tied up at the moment."

Something about the Queen's composed countenance struck her as wrong. As if it was covered in fine hairline cracks. "I'd like to see him."

"Of course, of course. But, you haven't answered my question: does the throne of Spades suit
Alice sighed, placing the black crown back upon her head. "As much as any, I suppose. I just want to rest now and see my husband."

"You are as single-minded as a Hightopp, my dear."

"I did become one," Alice retorted. "I don't think I'm being unreasonable, Mirana," she said, adjusting her pack on her shoulder. "I'm tired. I want to rest. I've missed my husband."

"We can see about fetching Hatta, but as for the rest...well, it would be rather rude for the hostess to rest. Don't you think, my dear?"

"Hostess?" She had reluctantly become a queen, but she hadn't intended on becoming a hostess.

"Come, you have a whole host of guests waiting to celebrate your coronation with you," Mirana said, gesturing behind her. "They have been waiting for their hostess. You know what happens to a host without a hostess, don't you?"

"They go home?" Alice asked hopefully.

"Put a crown on their heads and suddenly they're a jester." She laughed, as she reached to touch her own crown. "I would suggest leaving that to the professionals, Alice."

Alice crossed her arms over her chest. "I can tell you what isn't a laughing matter, Your Majesty. There is a great deal to be done in Underland. We have a great deal to see to that should take precedence over parties. The Grumblers have every right to grumble. Your people—our people—need assistance. Perhaps a meeting between us two would be a better use of our time at the present."

Mirana sighed. "What you have yet to learn, my dear, is that rule requires Pomp and Circumstance as much as Action."

"I sincerely doubt that. Your people need Action more than elegant parties. I have been amongst them: I know."

The Queen's gaze slid over her. "No doubt you are very well informed, and we shall discuss what it is you have seen, but this party is essential to establishing your rule. Authority is confirmed through such state occasions. If we retreat to our castles to govern from afar and merely sign decrees, the people forget about us and begin to think they can rule on their own, that all goes smoothly without the presence of their queen."

"Not all goes smoothly," Alice protested.

"No, but should they come to the conclusion that we are not needed, either due to incompetence or lack of visibility, we shall all be in grave danger. Underland needs its monarchs. You have been shown this, I believe?"

She nodded reluctantly.

"And there will be time for chatter after we publicly establish your right to rule. Otherwise, you are just another noisome advisor. People dislike advisors, Alice. Come now, you're wet through and through and I will not brook anymore excuses. To the party, hmm?" Mirana asked brightly, as she offered her Champion her arm.

Alice frowned. Being Queen did not seemingly confer much control. At least not yet.
Mirana, whose white skirts were in much better shape than her own now shabby white garments, continued to stand elbow out until Alice took it. Black would have held up much better if she had only known her fate beforehand.

As they approached the party, Alice could hear the crowd of people who had gathered to celebrate her coronation. As the faces came into view, she looked from one to another, searching for a familiar top hat, but there was none to be found.

There were, however, two large empty thrones at the head table. One white, one black. She would have turned to Mirana to ask her how they had known, but a throng was already gathering around them and sweeping Alice towards the table. A crowd that not only did not include Tarrant, but also failed to include Mally and Thackery as far as she could tell.

When she was seated at her throne, however, she saw Mally and Thackery seated at her right. To be fair, they were not sitting as one would expect. Mally's back was turned to her and Thackery was crouched under the table with just his back paws sticking out all akimbo. She could not see him entirely, but she could hear his head thumping the underside of the table, however.

"It's good to see you again, Mally. Mally?" Alice said, leaning forward and trying to catch the Dormouse's attention, when she failed to respond.

The atmosphere was merry enough, but something was making Alice feel uncomfortable, confined. She would feel more at ease if her husband was with her. "Mally, have you seen Tarrant?"

Mally spun around. Even through her white fur, Alice could make out the flush of her skin. She gesticulated wildly with her hatpin sword. "Aye, I know where 'e is. Why don't you? Why are you 'ere, and not freeing 'im?"

"Freeing him?" Alice looked to Mirana seated beside her, but Mirana was gracefully drinking from a chalice, seemingly unconcerned by the Royal Hatter's absence, despite Alice's repeated request to be reunited with him. "Where is Tarrant?" she demanded loudly.

Mirana turned blinking eyes on her. "Really, Alice, we need to see to it that this party is a positive experience for everyone. For the surety of your throne, my dear. Did we not just speak on this? Was I not perfectly clear?"

"Where is my husband!"

The crowd grew quiet, all eyes suddenly trained on the queens seated before them, instead of the gaily attired performers that twirled about the tables or the mountains of elaborate food piled atop the tables. Alice's eyes skittered over the crowd and finally fell on a red wine stain spreading before her. She had not even realized that she had knocked over her chalice. The stain on the white silk tablecloth was probably no darker than the rush of angry red she felt staining her face.

Still Mirana remained unmoved.

Alice pushed back her chair, her hands fistied at her sides. "Either you know where my husband is or I need to search for him. Which is it, Your Majesty?" she gritted.

"He's not far from here," the Queen said softly.

Mally hopped down from the chair and called up to Alice. "I know where she put 'im. I'll show you."
Alice strode after Mally, winding through the meadow towards a small grove of trees. Her heart beat faster, as she saw her husband's back. He was seated in a chair with his arms tied up behind him. In fact, his entire body was bound to the chair, and the chair had fallen sideways. Her husband was awkwardly sitting in a chair with his cheek pressed into the dirt. His hat some feet away and covered in dust. The sight enraged her.

"They tied 'im up," Mally explained before Alice broke into a run.

"Tarrant," she panted, as she fell to her knees alongside him. His eyes were orange and set in darkly stained lids. She stroked his forehead with a shaking hand. "Just wait," she said, as she dug in her pocket for the cheese knife she knew she still had on her person.

"Alice," he lisped, his eyes slowly clearing.

"Yes, husband, hold still," she instructed, moving to free his wrists, which were painfully raw from struggling against his bounds.

"I can help," Mally boasted, crawling atop his shoulder to begin work on another one of the loop of ropes binding him to the chair. "I didn't dare until you arrived. The Queen seemed mad. Crazy to have a party at any cost," she explained before applying her teeth to the rope.

"I was so worried, Alice. Are you all right?" Tarrant asked weakly.

"I'm fine. It was the Crow, but it's just hungry. It's no threat. Why did she do this?"

"'e was makin' a fuss," Mally said, as one rope popped and then another. "She didn't like it one bit. His carryin' on was disturbin' her."

"I was, Alice—making a fuss. I thought…I thought you were in danger. It felt as if…"

She shushed him softly, as his wrists came free. "I'll have you free of these in a second." She turned to his feet, which were also bound tightly about the ankles of his boots. "So, her party was more important, was it? She tied up her most loyal subject?" Alice seethed, as she sawed away at the constraints with the dull knife.

"To keep 'im out of the way. That's right. She did. Seemed right mad!"

"I won't stand for this! We'll have this out now. I didn't agree to become a queen so that she might treat my husband in such a manner."

His feet came free and Mally had succeeded in freeing his middle, so she helped him to sit upright. His family tartan was dusty from the forest floor, a condition that no doubt would have disturbed him if he was not already consumed with concern for her safety.

"Alice," he said, stretching his hand out to her, "perhaps now she will be better. You're Queen now, so the madness…"

But Alice shook her head. "I've had enough of this. Enough."

Nothing would prevent her from returning to the party and putting a stop to Mirana's self-indulgent madness. There was a kingdom to run. People to care for. Loyal subject to whom she owed everything. Tarrant and Mally hurried after her, but their words were drowned out by the certainty that only She could do something about the White Queen and she would do something Now.

The White Queen was responsible for all this nonsense. This madness. This cruelty. It would end
here today.

Tarrant sometimes described the Madness as an enveloping darkness in which he sunk so that he was not always fully aware of what it was he was doing. He had made some very bad decisions when lost to that darkness. Alice would come to recall the next few minutes in very similar terms.

What called her back was the press of a hand to her arm and a voice.

"My Alice."

Alice's vision cleared, and she blinked quickly to see that she was gripping the White Queen by her narrow shoulders, crushing the gossamer fabric of her sleeves under her fingers. She not only held her tight. No, she was also shaking her with all her might. Perhaps she would shake her head right off. With a satisfying 'pop'.

Mirana's face flushed blue to the roots of her white hair, her eyes were wide with fear.

*I'm mad now. As mad as any queen of Underland. That is my fate.*

"Alice, you choose what kind of Queen you shall be."

It was her husband's soft voice. She knew it to be so.

Her hands froze, the Queen's head thrust forward violently at the conclusion of a good shake.

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps it was her choice. Her path to make.

Her hands dropped, releasing the Queen.

The crowd that had gathered for the happy occasion quickly began to disperse with squeals of fright and mutterings and silent flight. Mirana made no move to call them back, her hand fluttering to her temple as armed Pawns rushed to her side.

"Haud awa frae ma guidwife!" Tarrant demanded, as the White Pawns closed in on Alice with white pikes raised menacingly. [2]

"Keep away from your Queen!" Mally added from her perch atop the Hatter's shoulder.

She could see that Thackery had also pushed out from under the table and was wielding a fish knife for all the good it would do him.

"I don't want to be queen," Alice moaned, knocking the crown from her head and stepping back into her husband's side. Alice gripped his arm, more for shelter from what she had just done than the advancing Pawns.

"You shook me," Mirana said, seemingly stunned with her breath coming in shallow gasps.

"And you tied up 'er 'usband," Mally countered. "She was only protectin' 'er own." Her words were accompanied by accusatory jabs of her hatpin sword.

"No, I had no right to do that," Alice said, still clinging to her husband's arm. "Heavens, Tarrant, what is wrong with me? Am I mad already?" she asked, looking up with trepidation into her husband's eyes.

His pupils were unevenly dilated and his irises were not a happy green, but he was calmer than she would have hoped in this moment of chaos. It was a comfort to find that she could count on him to be controlled when she was not. That they both were not completely lost to madness.
"You're both mad," the Dormouse groused. "If you'd only listen to me or to the Hatta, if you'd only listen to proper sense, you might be better off. I said not to tie him up. Perfectly ungrateful. That's what you are."

"Yes, I suppose I am. Step back," Mirana directed her guards with a raised hand. "She poses no threat."

"I most certainly do!" Mally retorted, although the White Queen's assertion was in regards to the Queen of Spades and not the Dormouse.

"Aye, she's dicey and dodgy," Thackery rejoined, shaking the fish knife before him, although, he had gotten turned around somehow and was addressing a tree stump instead of the Queen or her Pawns.

Alice sighed on a shudder. She had created a terrible stir and frightened all of her friends. "I'm so sorry, Mirana." Whatever the White Queen had done, violence was not the answer. Where would they be if they both resorted to such measures? What would become of Underland? Her friends? Her family?

Mirana looked shamefacedly at the turf beneath their feet. "I had hoped the madness would pass immediately. When you were crowned, I should have untied Hatta immediately. That should have been my fondest wish, but I'm afraid the intoxication of power still lingered. When I saw you upon that bank, I imagined I could cow you to my desires. Shape you to my intentions. I did not want anyone getting in my way."

"Was the Lost Book wrong?" Alice asked, fearing that it might be. That two was not enough even in the short term. That madness was a given for the monarchs of the land.

Mirana touched her chest, which had ceased to heave, with her hand. "No, as painful as it may have been for both of us, that shake you gave me loosened the grip the madness had upon me, I believe." She did look more composed. More herself and less an unnatural duplicate infused with malevolence. "We shall deal as equals in the future, I promise you. And we shall set about filling the other thrones in good faith."

Alice was not sure whether the Queen's promises meant all that much or whether her own madness was entirely fleeting, but she knew that her responsibilities did not dematerialize just because she had thrown off the crown itself. The people of Underland still needed assistance. More assistance than one queen could hope to provide.

She turned her cheek into Tarrant's shoulder. "This is dreadful."

He stroked her uncrowned head. "We'll go Above. You shan't ever be asked to be a queen there. It shall only be Plain Alice and Plain Hatter. Together as a family."

She knew in her heart that she could not accept his offer. She had never fit Above. Tarrant certainly would not and their child would be a child of Underland as well. No, she could not accept it, but it soothed her to hear it nonetheless. A great deal had changed, but her husband's devotion had not. Nor would it ever. He would be at her side, helping her make the path, wherever it led.

She was the Queen of Spades: she needed to fight for her people.

She sniffed and disentangled herself from her husband, casting about for her discarded crown, but Mirana already held it out to her with steady hands and a steady gaze. Alice took it from her and turned it round, letting the light catch its smooth black surface that reflected her face back at her.
Just Plain Alice. No different.

Reassured, she rallied her muchness and set it atop her head once more.

"I chose you," Alice reminded her husband. "I chose Underland."

...

The weeks passed and although another coronation celebration was not attempted, much was done to improve the lives of the people of Underland, which seemed to cement Alice's place as a sovereign as much as a fête would have. This work was accomplished through the combined efforts of White and Spades and the result of a flurry of meetings, which required Alice and Tarrant to stay at Mirana's court for some time. In these meetings much was discussed: the past, the future, and the present.

"I know you wished for a quiet life with Hatta, my dear."

Alice tilted her head. "Yes, I thought very much that I did. But, Underland has different plans for me and it has always seemed to know best." Her job as queen might give her a greater sense of purpose. As Chessur had intimated, she might be of use again to more than just her Hatter.

"The responsibility should not have been yours. You had already played your part. It should have been Lily, Alice, I'm sorry."

They had discussed a great deal and put their friendship back on course, but Lily had never come up in these discussions, and Alice tensed at the mention of her name. No, they had not spoken of Lily and Alice had not confessed that she carried Tarrant's child either. She said no word of the whispered conversations she shared with him at night. Talk of paint for a nursery. Talk of names. Talk of booties and blankets. Talk of harvest.

"What I've put you through, what I've put Hatta through with my madness." Mirana's hand fluttered to her head, pressing to her temple as her lashes fanned her cheeks. "I don't ever speak of her, because my hopes were so pinned on her that it brings me pain. I thought she would sit my throne and be the kindest of all queens. She did not have to work to be kind, you know, as I do. She just was. Her death…it is no excuse, I know, but…"

"I'm sorry, Mirana," Alice replied, feeling tears prick the corners of her eyes. Her baby was not yet born, yet she could not bear the thought of losing her. She wished there had still been a Lily to save.

"Yes, yes of course you are, my dear." She swallowed visibly and regained her practiced composure. "I only regret that I have chained you to yet another duty in order to save me." The Queen shook her head. "And should you and Hatta have children," Mirana said with a flash that seemed to indicate she already knew their Secret, "they will sit the thrones of Underland as well. I have yoked the Hightopps, when I should have worked to free them, owing everything to my dear Hatta and Alice already."

"Underland bound me here, Mirana. My heart has bound me here," Alice qualified. "I have given myself to Underland, but let me be clear about one thing. Whatever children we might have, they will make their own path. No one—not even Underland itself—will control their destinies."

Alice steeled herself for the return of Mirana's eerie grin, but she remained serene, when she pressed her fair hand over Alice's own. "You know, Alice, if there is anyone in Underland who can bend Destiny to their will, I believe it is you. I only said it, because we need good people, and what people are better than the Hightopps?"
Alice smirked at the compliment, which might have been skillfully employed, but was still unquestionably sincere. "If Tarrant and I ever should have children… if they should want to be crowned, Mirana, they shall be. And in the meantime, we might continue to look for others, others who would do Underland proud, sitting the unoccupied thrones."

The White Queen squeezed her hand. "For now it shall be the two of us. That is more than enough for me."

Indeed, it seemed that it was.

[1] In four color decks, the spade is generally black. They are also representative of nobility and war. In the Italo-Spanish deck, the spade is a sword.

[2] Haud awa frae – keep away from (Sc)
Tarrant looked up from his work as Nieve skipped into the room, her blonde hair looking more unmanageably curly than usual.

"Little girl, little girl, where have you been?" he asked.

"Gathering roses to give to the Queen," Nieve answered, as she pulled out an unwieldly bouquet of pink roses from behind her back.[1]

"For your Mam?" he asked, finishing a fine stitch in the white cloche he had been toiling over for the last half hour or so—one could never be certain, Time being who he was.

Nieve spread the roses across his table, covering up several bolts of silk, which would no doubt be snagged by the thorns. He frowned, but said nothing. This, he considered, is why Alice sometimes whispered in his ear at night that he was permissive, but whispering anything in his ear did very little to reform him.

"No, for Auntie Mirana."

His frown turned upside down. Pink roses for the White Queen: Nieve, the first child born in Underland since the end of the reign of the Red Queen, brought color into everyone's lives, whether they were ready for it or not.

"Roses for Auntie Mirana? How thoughtful, my wee bairn." He selected a white ribbon from his endless pile of white trim. "Set aside some for your Mam as well."

"Does she like pink?" Nieve asked, climbing atop a stool and tucking her legs beneath her to gain some height.

"As much as Queen Mirana does." That was no untruth.

"Do all Queens like pink?"

Tacking the white ribbon onto the hat, he paused, considering, "I think the only things most Queens can agree upon are bread and honey."[2]

"Mam and Auntie Mirana agree on a great many things," Nieve asserted, as she pulled one of the roses from the pile and began to pluck its petals so that they fluttered to the ground.

"Quite true, but quite unusual that sort of accord," Tarrant said, raising his brows over his work.

"What kind of queen is Mam?"

"A very good one." That was an easy enough question to answer.
Sometimes Nieve's questions could be quite difficult, as difficult as some of his choicest riddles. Why are March Hares not fond of marching? Why don't finger sandwiches contain buttered fingers? Why must I knock on your door at night?

It was well and good that Curiosity only ever took it into his head to kill cats, for otherwise his wife and little one would not be safe.[3]

"But she is not as much a queen as Auntie Mirana is," Nieve reasoned, tossing aside the denuded rose and leaning across the table to rest her elbows on its uneven surface.

Alice would be amused by that, but he felt the urge to defend his wife's Queenliness. "Just as much, I assure you."

"We do not live in a palace."

"Mam does not require a palace," he explained, reaching for a pair of scissors to trim a trailing thread.

Nieve placed an index finger to her lips, thinking. "Mam rarely wears her crown."

"She does not require that either," he said, holding the cloche before him and tilting it this way and that to see if it would suit Lady Namkin. "Your Mam rarely wears a head covering at all." One of Alice's very few Faults.

"If she does not require her crown, I would be happy to wear it," Nieve said.

Tarrant looked from the cloche to watch a smile spread across Nieve's face, as if she was concocting a Wonderful Plan. Nieve's plans had a tendency to end with cats in trees and stockings with ladders in them.

"When you are older, you may wear a crown, but for now Mam is the sole royal in our family."

The smile faded, and she said a little petulantly, "She does not have subjects."

Tarrant set the cloche down. "She certainly does, Nieve. Perhaps I should have said that first. Hmm, quite forgetful of me, perhaps even unpardonable, and if it was not for the magnanimous nature of our Monarch…"

"Faither!" Nieve exclaimed, sitting back on her heels and picking up a rose to wave before him.

"Thank you. Where was I?" he asked, blinking.

"Mam's subjects," she said while tucking her nose into the fragrant center of the rose.

He was quite envious, watching his wee one drink in the aroma. Tarrant held out his bethimbed hand, and as Nieve was finished with the aromatic perusal, she stretched the rose out to him. He smelled it as well. "You chose your roses very well. They are as sweet smelling as your Mam."

Nieve visibly puffed at the praise.

He smiled. "You and I are Mam's subjects. At first, when she was not much older than you are now, she was a Queen of Underland but a Sovereign of No One, you see, but then your Mam came back and she became the Queen of My Heart. She became Sovereign of One."

Nieve took back the rose, adding it to the pile once more. "Does that make you a king?"
Tarrant straightened his bowtie—the very thought! "No, I'm much luckier than that, dear heart. It makes me a Beloved Subject. As you are as well. We two are Mam's beloveds."

"Shall she ever have any other subjects?"

Tarrant felt color rush to his face and he imagined his eyes were changing hue rather rapidly. This was the sort of Conversation he preferred to have with Alice present. His wife was not so easily Flustered as he; she always seemed to know Just What to Say. "That is for Faither and Mam to decide," he finally managed to respond.

Nieve considered him for a moment before slipping down from her stool, her little black patents clicking on the floor. "Will you tell me when you decide? I would like to be the first to meet and welcome any new subjects to the realm."

He cleared his throat, "Yes, my dear. Any additions to the kingdom will be brought to your attention, as one of its foremost citizens."

"Thank you, Faither."

He stood, fondly watching as she tripped from the room. The second citizen of the realm had not only doubled the population of the citizenry, but also made the kingdom a family. He thought Alice preferred it that way.

A realm was a responsibility. A family a respite.

THE END

[1] "Little Girl, Little Girl, Where Have You Been?" can be found in print as early as the 1840's. It's a less well-known version of "Pussycat, Pussycat Where Have You Been?"

"Little girl, little girl, where have you been?"

"Gathering roses to give to the Queen."

"Little girl, little girl, what gave she you?"

"She gave me a diamond as big as my shoe."

[2] The second verse of "Sing a Song of Sixpence" from which Tarrant quotes is as follows:

"The King was in his countinghouse,
Counting out his money;
The Queen was in the parlor
Eating bread and honey.
The maid was in the garden,
Hanging out the clothes.
Along there came a big black bird
And snipped off her nose!"
A version of the modern four verses can be found first in *Gammer Gurton's Garland or The Nursery Parnassus* published in 1784.

[3] The earliest printed reference to the origin of the proverb, curiosity killed the cat, is attributed to the British playwright Ben Jonson in his 1598 play, *Every Man in His Humour*, which was performed first by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare used a similar quote in his circa 1599 play, *Much Ado About Nothing*: "What, courage man! What though care killed a cat, thou hast mettle enough in thee to kill care."

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